

Introduction

Paul, apostle of Jesus Christ, was one of the greatest religious leaders of all time. He is also one of the very few from the ancient world whom we can study firsthand thanks to the fact that he wrote letters and that some of them were saved, edited (very slightly), and published. We have no idea how many letters Paul wrote to churches and individuals during his apostolic career. From those that we have, however, we learn a great deal about the world in which he lived, his activities, his personality, his assistants and colleagues, his enemies, his churches, and, most interesting of all, his thought. Throughout his life, Paul was passionately committed to his cause: first the cause of persecuting the Jews who were followers of Jesus, then of spreading the movement that he had formerly tried to stamp out. His letters express his passion; it is one of their most striking features. In this work I have tried to let Paul, the passionate man who was obsessed with his cause, shine through his sometimes difficult theological arguments.

Paul was controversial in his own day. He had heated—almost violent—arguments with other members of the early Christian movement. He denounced his opponents in vivid terms, and his letters have inspired religious polemicists (people who wage verbal warfare) for centuries.

Since Paul's letters are occasional and informal (rather than being polished and revised for wide use), we have an intimate portrait of him and his thought. The letters are sometimes movingly self-revealing, as when he is pushed to boasting by the Corinthian opposition. He sometimes bares his soul in a way that is very rare in ancient literature.

Odd though it may seem, we know Jesus less well than Paul. Some of Jesus' words and deeds are found in the Gospels, but the Gospels were written one or two generations after his death, and they made use of sources of varying reliability. Moreover, there are four Gospels, and each of the authors had his own views, with the result that Jesus is depicted somewhat differently from Gospel to Gospel. In my own judgment, however, the most serious problem in getting close to the historical Jesus is that the *context* in which he uttered his memorable sayings is usually uncertain, since many of the teachings of Jesus appear in different contexts in the Gospels. This deprives us of precise understanding. For example, he said, "Love your enemies" (Matt. 5:43). This is important as a generalization, but it would be nice to know if he had any enemies in particular in mind—Herod Antipas? Caiaphas? Pilate? A local landowner?¹

The study of Paul is largely free of these problems. We have entire letters responding to problems in various churches. It is relatively simple to infer the circumstances or context from Paul's answers and arguments. Moreover, his letters do not reveal heavy editing or revision. We sometimes suspect that a later editor, possibly the person or persons who collected his letters (see chap. 6), merged parts of two or more letters or rearranged some of the material (as we shall see when we investigate 2 Corinthians and Philippians), but there are

1. Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee, where Jesus grew up; Caiaphas was the high priest, who also was the local ruler of Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified; Pilate was a Roman appointee who oversaw the whole of Jewish Palestine from his base in Caesarea, on the coast.

only a few substantial problems in deciding what he wrote and the circumstances in which he wrote it.

Paul dictated to a scribe, whom we would call a secretary, but his letters seem to have been sent off unrevised, with occasional broken sentences or jarring syntax. We probably have pretty well what he himself actually dictated. The secretary played a minor role—far, far less than the authors of the Gospels.² The consequence is that we are reading Paul’s own words, whereas we have nothing that Jesus himself wrote, and only second- or third-hand reports of his teaching.

Paul’s surviving letters give us the earliest information about Christianity and how it was established in various cities in the Roman Empire. Paul was active as an apostle in the 30s, 40s, and 50s of the Common Era (CE). The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles (Acts), which refer to earlier events, were actually written later than Paul’s letters, in the 70s to 90s.

Paul would be one of the most interesting people in the ancient world to study even if he occupied a smaller place in history. But, of course, he is one of the most influential figures in the history of the Near East and the West. Paul was trying to convert gentiles (non-Jews) to worship the God of Israel and to accept Jesus as Son of God and savior of the world. Other missionaries had this same task, but Paul was the preeminent “apostle to the gentiles.” He faced the problem of thinking up new theological expressions and new practices for a movement that, though deeply rooted in Judaism and thus in some ways old, was partly new.

It need hardly be added that the Christian movement became a largely gentile religion and that it took over the ancient Western world and part of the Near East, supplanting all the other religions in those regions except its parent, Judaism. In the course of Christian

2. Some scholars dispute this view of Paul’s letters. See below, ch. 6 n. 6.

history, many of the greatest theologians, such as Augustine and Luther, were heavily indebted to Paul. Reformers, in particular, have drawn on Paul's prose in the controversies of their own times.

This enormous influence is the result of the power of his letters. His own personality was doubtless powerful in his day, but his historical importance does not rest on the number of people whom he converted, nor on the subsequent importance of the congregations that he founded. The "big three" centers of Christianity would become Rome, Antioch in Syria, and Alexandria in Egypt. Paul founded none of these churches. Thus Christianity would have spread without him, but without his letters to help shape the thought of the most important Christians, its history would have been quite different.

Sources

Of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament, thirteen are attributed to Paul, and approximately half of another, the book of Acts, deals with Paul. In short, we owe about half of the New Testament to Paul and the people whom he influenced. There are, however, very serious doubts about the authenticity of six of the letters, and several reservations about the reliability of Acts. We shall consider aspects of Acts in discussing Paul's biography, but I shall not debate the authenticity of letters that are disputed. This has been done extensively in the history of New Testament scholarship, and it is easy to find discussions of authorship. In chapter six I shall say a few more words about the letters that are classed as "deuteropauline"—that is, letters belonging to the Pauline school, but not written by Paul himself.

In the main body of the book (Part II) we shall study in detail the **seven undisputed Pauline letters**, those generally accepted as having been directly dictated by Paul himself. Paul doubtless wrote many

more letters, now lost, but we must rely on the seven letters that we have. In the sequence in which they occur in the New Testament, the seven undisputed letters are these: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.³

We shall, however, consider them in their approximate chronological sequence, except for Philemon, a one-page personal letter that cannot be dated, with which we shall begin. The resulting order, which will govern Part II, is this: Philemon, 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians 10–13, 2 Corinthians 1–9, Galatians, Philippians, and Romans. In the chapters on the Corinthian correspondence I shall explain why 2 Corinthians 10–13 is chronologically earlier than 1 Corinthians 1–9.

The deuteropauline letters—the letters that are attributed to Paul, but which were written in his name, rather than by him—are Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus.

The Conclusion offers a summary of some of the main theological points of the letters.

The Text of the Letters

A frequently asked question is whether or not we have Paul's actual letters. The short answer is "no," but the question requires a brief explanation of textual history. The original of each letter was sent to the church or individual to whom Paul wrote. As far as we can tell, he did not have his secretary make a copy for his own future use. He wrote ad hoc letters directed to specific problems and situations, and he seems to have given no thought to producing a systematic statement of his views — though Romans reveals reflection on previous disputes, and is in part a revision of some of Galatians

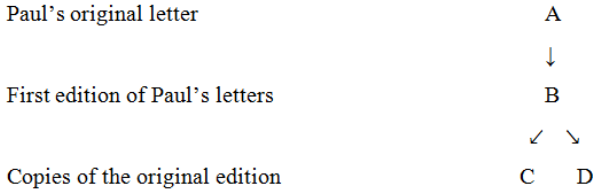
3. On the letters that are deuteropauline or tritopauline (written by members of his "school" in the generation or so after his death), see below, pp. 150–55.

and 1 Corinthians. Despite this, it too is a specific letter, addressed to a specific church, and dealing with immediate and concrete issues.

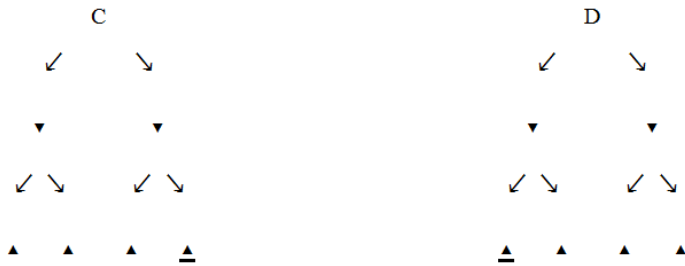
Sometime after he wrote the letters, and probably after his death, a follower went around to each of his churches, or at least several of them, and collected, edited, and published what Paul had written (see chap. 6). The editing, as we noted above, was very light, but we shall see a few traces of it. For the present, let us simply say that Paul's letters were collected and published.

To publish a book in the ancient world the author or editor merely copied and circulated it. Multiple copies could be made in the following way: a reader stood at the back of a room and read the text, while a number of scribes copied from his dictation. The copies were proofread, and errors were corrected, either by writing the correct text above the word or phrase in question, or by marginal annotation. These copies, of course, could later be copied in the same way, or an individual scribe could produce a single copy. We do not know how Paul's letters were copied in the first place, whether by a roomful of scribes or a single scribe. In any case, after the correspondence was compiled, multiple copies were made and sent to various Christian churches. When the occasion arose, either because a copy wore out or because new churches wanted their own scrolls containing Paul's letters, further copies were made.

Inevitably errors crept in (some due to scribal "improvements"), and slightly divergent texts arose. All of the earliest copies of Paul's letters have been lost. A few second-century fragments have been found, but we do not have a full text of Paul's letters that was copied earlier than the fourth century. Scholars study these fragments and the earliest manuscripts, as well as the thousands of later manuscripts, to determine textual *families*. The ancestors of each family no longer exist, but they can be inferred from surviving manuscripts. I shall present a schematic chart that reveals the process:



Copies, and copies of copies, dividing into two families (surviving manuscripts are indicated by underlining):



In this model, there are two surviving manuscripts from the fifth generation of manuscripts. To represent the true situation, we would have to have a few more families, many more generations of manuscripts, and also many more manuscripts. With enough evidence, however, scholars can arrange generational charts and then study the characteristics of the various textual families (indicated by C and D in the chart). Some families will appear to be more reliable than others. Moreover, each manuscript can be studied, as can each individual textual variant.

I shall give an example of an individual variant. According to the generally accepted text, Paul wrote this in Gal. 3:13-14:

¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . . ¹⁴in order that in Christ Jesus the *blessing* of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the *promise* of the Spirit through faith.

According to some manuscripts, however, verse 14 reads as follows:

In order that in Christ Jesus the *blessing* of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the *blessing* of the Spirit through faith.

In the line that mentions the Spirit, which is earlier—“promise of the Spirit” or “blessing of the Spirit”? Several well-regarded manuscripts support each reading. In this case, a specialist in textual variants (a text critic) must argue solely on the basis of intrinsic probability. Would a scribe have been more likely to change “promise” to “blessing” or “blessing” to “promise”? The former is more likely, since the argument is smoother if Paul wrote *blessing* both times: the blessing of Abraham comes to the gentiles, the blessing of the Spirit comes to us. Scribes would have been less likely to change from “blessing” to “promise.” To determine the better reading, we reverse the probable scribal preference and follow the manuscripts in which first “blessing” then “promise” appears.

Arguments of this sort are not absolutely conclusive, but they are the best we can do: we develop hypotheses about preferred scribal “improvements” of the text and then follow readings that are against those tendencies.

Thus on the basis of the study of families of manuscripts and individual textual variants, scholars over the last 150 years or so have developed **critical texts**: texts based on manuscripts and on choices among them that are governed by scholarly argument. A good critical text has lots of footnotes giving variants and the evidence for them.

This may sound more uncertain than it is. There are not very many substantial questions about what Paul wrote. In the present case, for example, we would understand him perfectly well if we read “blessing” in both instances. Nevertheless, when we read Paul’s letters in Greek, we are reading a reconstructed text, based on comparing and studying many underlying manuscripts.

Most of us, however, actually read translations of a reconstructed text. A translation never captures the full meaning of the original, and this fact accounts for the existence of so many translations of famous books. Translations of the Bible are especially numerous. They are produced either by individuals or by committees of scholars. The best English translations overall are the official translations produced by groups of scholars: the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version, the Jerusalem Bible, the New English Bible, and the New International Version. My own preference is the Revised Standard Version, but since it is no longer readily available I shall usually quote from the New Revised Standard Version. I shall sometimes, however, alter the wording slightly in order to present the literal translation of the Greek. And frequently I shall cite two or more translations of crucial words and phrases.

Thus we shall often have occasion to examine the question of the best translation of specific words and phrases. The comparison of different translations with the original Greek text is one of the features of this book. This can be a little tedious, but I think that it is a mistake for people to regard the text of “the Bible” as being the same as the text of their translation, and some comparisons will make this clear. It will turn out that modern translators, just like ancient scribes, tend to shape the text according to their own preferences.

The Goals of the Present Book

To start with, I wish to try to give the reader some “feel” for the ancient world and what Paul’s life was actually like. For this reason, there is a fairly substantial section (Part I) on Paul’s life, which attempts to situate him in his world. I have somewhat reluctantly decided not to offer a thumbnail sketch of the Roman Empire in Paul’s day and the history of Judaism, though both are extremely important if one is to understand Paul. My experience as a reader is

that thumbnail sketches of Judaism and the Greco-Roman world are too brief to do much good.

Instead, I discuss various aspects of the historical circumstances as they arise in the study of Paul's letters. For example, paganism is discussed in relation to 1 Thessalonians, and Greek and Jewish sexual mores are considered in the chapters on 1 Corinthians. Judaism is discussed extensively in chapter three, on Paul's life before his conversion to Christianity.

The principal aim of this book, however, is to explain the contents of the letters. Understanding Paul's letters requires us to study the *topics* or *issues* that he addressed; his *conclusions* with regard to each point; and his *arguments* in favor of his *conclusions*. I put topics, conclusions, and arguments in this sequence because I think that his conclusions usually came before his arguments—as is the case with most of us. Over a long period of time we may come to a certain conviction, but we may not arrange neat arguments in favor of it unless we need to defend it or wish to persuade someone else that it is true.

At their very best, humans can change their minds because of argumentation, and in this case it is easy for them to repeat the arguments that they found persuasive. But often finding the best argument to support one of our conclusions requires some experimentation. This can sometimes be seen in Paul's letters.

Paul was a debater of considerable variety and great power. His arguments in favor of his convictions are often stirring—so stirring that one or more of them may be taken to be the very heart of his entire message. But we should assume that his conclusions were what mattered to him. If he produced four arguments in favor of the same point, it is unreasonable to think that one of these arguments was more important to him than the conclusion.

Paul was an ancient Jew, and so he argued like an ancient Jew,

backing up his views by quotation from his Scripture. We shall see that Paul's arguments, though scholarly in his day, are unlike those of modern scholars who argue about the meaning of texts.

It is not clear how well his original readers followed his arguments, since he sometimes explained his positions by debating at his own level, which was that of an expert, not at the level of the recipients of the letters. In our time, this is sometimes the case when a doctor or lawyer speaks to a patient or client. For this reason, Paul's arguments usually require some explanation. Some of them are self-evident even today and even in translation. Many, however, are relatively opaque to the modern reader; some of them absolutely require study of Paul's text in Greek; and some require study of the **Septuagint**, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

The New Testament book 2 Peter famously states, "there are some things in them [Paul's letters] hard to understand" (2 Pet. 3:16). Most of these things are *arguments*. Paul's conclusions are generally perfectly clear, but the logic of his reasoning is often difficult to follow. Many, many of the pages of this book are dedicated to explaining Paul's arguments.

If the conclusions are usually easy to understand and the arguments difficult, what about the *topics*? We might imagine they are obvious. Unfortunately for the reader, that is not always the case. When I taught Paul to undergraduates at Duke University, I started the course with this assignment: "Read 1 Thessalonians, note the topics, and in one sentence write a statement of each topic in your own words." This occasionally met ridicule: it's too easy. How stupid does he think we are?

In the hundreds of assignments that I read over the years, only one student correctly listed all of the topics of 1 Thessalonians. The topic of 1 Thess. 4:13-15 proved especially difficult. Everyone saw that 4:16-17 is about the resurrection, but the point of the previous

three verses was almost always missed. No, the students were not stupid, but the content and implication of those verses were totally unexpected and therefore incomprehensible. We cannot “see” what we cannot understand, and so our eyes just pass over it, just as they do when, reading our own language, we suddenly encounter words in a language we do not know. We just skip them.

In other cases, we understand the subject well enough, but not what the topic meant in the ancient world. We recognize, for example, that sexual morality is the topic of 1 Thess. 4:3-7, and everyone comprehends what sexual morality is. Without study, however, we do not perceive the contrast that Paul is drawing between “you,” his gentile converts in Thessalonica, and “the gentiles” (v. 5). His converts should not do something or other “like the gentiles.” This requires a little sorting out.

That is to say, not only are Paul’s arguments difficult to comprehend, but often even the topics need substantial explanation.

I have discussed topics, conclusions, and arguments, which can be studied on the page. We must also consider *reasons*: *why* did Paul come to the conclusion to which he came? That is seldom on the page in clear words, and finding Paul’s reasons requires reading his mind. This is a less certain enterprise than the study of arguments, but I believe that in some cases we can actually do it. If Paul says enough about a topic, we may discern the reason for which he held a specific view.

A final aim of the book is to regard all of the topics, conclusions, and arguments as important. Usually *theology* is privileged, which means that more time is spent on Galatians and Romans than on the other letters. Or one may be in search of *social history*, in which case 1 Corinthians comes to the fore. I shall regard 1 Thessalonians—which sometimes is barely noticed in general books on Paul—as being just as important for understanding Paul as is Romans—though undoubtedly

the theology is less profound. It nevertheless tells us a lot about Paul and his mission.

The Significance of Chronological Order

I have come to the view, which is now a minority opinion, that the study of the *development* of Paul's thought is worthwhile. Thirty-nine years ago, when I was committing youthful follies (rather than those of senescence), I thought that it was not,⁴ but my own thought on this has developed. I now think that Paul's thought becomes clearer when we study the letters in chronological order. Some of the large topics of Paul's thought, such as participation in Christ and righteousness by faith, have, in my view, developed in the course of Paul's ministry. Many scholars have found development in Paul's **eschatological** passages—those concerning the “last things,” such as the return of the Lord and the resurrection of the dead. We shall consider this in detail when studying the Corinthian correspondence. Moreover, our study of *suffering* and *the Spirit* in Paul's letters will reveal the development or growth of his ideas. I think that, once we read Paul's letters in chronological sequence, growth, development, or evolution will become apparent.

Because most studies of Paul's thought have concentrated on his theology, his letter to the Romans has often dominated the author's view.⁵ Romans is placed first in the Bible; it is a long letter; there are lots of theological themes; there is some reconsideration of topics in previous letters; it is the most profound and at the same time most difficult letter in the Pauline corpus. Moreover, Protestant scholars find it to be supportive of Luther's theology, and Protestant

4. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 432–33 n. 9.

5. James Dunn offers several reasons to justify giving primacy to Romans in writing a theology of Paul: *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 25–26. If one is trying to write a theology to guide Protestant belief, these are important considerations. We do not, however, understand the life and work and thought of Paul by focusing on one letter.

scholarship has dominated Pauline studies for centuries. The importance of Romans seems to blind people to the significance of Paul's theological statements in the letters written prior to Galatians and Romans.

I do not wish to downgrade Romans, but rather to elevate the importance of the "lesser" letters. We do that by reading them in order and seeing what we find. This would be true even if we were solely studying theology. In addition to wanting to understand his thought, however, the present book aims at describing and explaining Paul the man and his career; his personality; successes and failures; disagreements among the apostles; the process of starting Christianity in various places; how it fit into the Roman Empire and the Jewish Diaspora; and the like. This not to reduce the importance of Paul's theological thought. Although I have no desire to try to create a synthesis of "Paul's theology" in order to produce a system, I would like to understand each theological point in its context.

Reading the letters in chronological order requires, of course, knowing the chronology. Despite some uncertainties, there is widespread (not universal) agreement on a few main points: 1 Thessalonians is the earliest surviving letter, Romans the last. (Romans replays some of the disputes in Galatians and 1 Corinthians.) First Corinthians was written before 2 Corinthians. Most of the letters were written during the same general period: after an apostolic conference in Jerusalem and before Paul raised money to take to Jerusalem in order to support the Christians there. (This act of charity led to his trial and arrest.) Only 1 Thessalonians comes from an earlier period, prior to the apostolic conference.

Where to put Galatians and Philippians is usually seen as less certain. They are before Romans, but the relationship of each to 1 and 2 Corinthians is more difficult to determine. There are also substantial

debates about how the various parts of 2 Corinthians (apparently composed of sections of more than one letter) relate to each other.

A full treatment of the chronology of the letters requires a book and, fortunately, Gregory Tatum has recently published it.⁶ His work makes the present book possible—though in some instances I have not followed his precise chronology.⁷ Nevertheless, his book relieves me of the necessity of including a major section on chronological issues and problems. In the appropriate places I shall point out the key passages that lead to the chronology used here, such as why it is best to put 2 Corinthians 10–13 before 2 Corinthians 1–9.⁸

As stated earlier, I shall treat the letters in the following order: Philemon, 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians 10–13, 2 Corinthians 1–9, Galatians, Philippians, and Romans. This sequence includes some simplifications and leaves out of account some possible rearrangements of a few parts of Paul's letters. I shall discuss some of the complications in the appropriate chapters.

The only chronological issue with which we are presently concerned is the *sequence of the letters*. We shall not reconsider the even more vexed issue of precise dates, such as the year of the Jerusalem conference and the date of Paul's work in Corinth.⁹ As

6. Gregory Tatum, *New Chapters in the Life of Paul: The Relative Chronology of His Career*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 41 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2006).

7. It is probable that 2 Corinthians 1–9 was written after Galatians, but the arrangement of the present book makes it much more convenient to consider it together with the rest of the Corinthian correspondence. I shall, however, consider part of 2 Corinthians 1–9 (2 Cor. 3:7–18) in connection with Philippians.

8. My first effort to work through the letters in chronological sequence was during a graduate seminar at Duke University on resurrection in Paul's letters, which I led in the early 1990s.

9. The study of calendar dates in Paul's life is very difficult, but there have been distinguished and enlightening studies. Books available in English include John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950); Robert Jewett, *A Chronology of Paul's Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); Gerd Lüdemann, *Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles: Studies in Chronology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). Knox stated the right principle of establishing Paul's chronology, which is to follow the letters rather than Acts. On the few occasions when I use a calendar date, I follow Lüdemann.

noted above, Paul wrote his letters in the 40s and 50s of the first century CE, and that is adequate information for our purposes (see also pp. 163–65).

I have worried and fretted about repetition. Some repetition is useful (to recall certain points, for emphasis, etc.), but too much repetition is tiresome for the reader. The scheme of this book requires repetition. I go through each letter, paragraph by paragraph, sometimes word by word, in chronological order. Many topics appear in more than one of Paul's letters; some topics occur repeatedly. To some degree this can be handled by using cross-references, but turning back and forth through a book to compare passages that are related to each other is also tedious. I would rather err on the side of repetition than to rely too heavily on cross-references.

To make matters slightly worse, I sometimes pull related passages that deal with large and complicated issues (such as the resurrection) out of their chronological order so that we can consider them all together. But then I have to say *something* about each one in its own context.

I hope that this explanation is an adequate apology to those who find too much repetition for their liking.

Genre of the Book

One last introductory note, which is of great importance: This book is a historical study of Paul, what he did, what he wrote, and what he thought. It is not about “what Christians ought to believe.” Throughout my life, when I have said something or other about Paul (or Jesus or the Gospels), someone has asked, “Do you mean that we should believe . . . ?” I do not know what other people *ought* to believe—except that they should love all other humans and protect

the universe from destruction. Christianity flourishes in part because of its variety and its multiplicity of forms, creeds, and practices. Some of the forms of Christianity—like some of the forms of other religions—have been inimical to human welfare, and I think that people ought to give them up, since they oppose any of the conceivable lists of “core Christian beliefs.”

In any case, I do not have any desire to tell other people what to believe about God, Christ, the resurrection, and so on. I am not a theologian. In the sections on theology I intend only to explain what Paul thought—and sometimes, of course, what other people then thought.