

Peter Frick

Understanding Paul

The Existential Perspective



Mohr Siebeck

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To
Voss
(Uli Frick)

brother
friend
existentialist

Eine ontologische Spezifizierung des Geschaffenen
unabhängig davon, daß Gott Versöhner und Erlöser ist,
der Mensch aber Sünder und Begnadigter,
gibt es nicht.

Alle metaphysischen Ideen von Ewigkeit und Zeitlichkeit,
Sein und Werden, Leben und Sterben, Wesen und Erscheinung
müssen in christlicher Seinslehre
an den Begriffen
vom Sein der Sünde
und der Gnade
gemessen bzw. neu gewonnen werden.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Akt und Sein* (DBW 2, 150)

There is no saving ontology,
but the ontological question
is implied in the question of salvation.

Paul Tillich
(*Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*, 85)

Preface

All life is hermeneutical; every book is hermeneutical. This book is no different. For many years I have been thinking about Paul, reading and studying his letters. My interest in Paul was, however, not focussed on the details of exegesis or the key theological questions of the day. I was also not initially interested in the debate between the old and new perspective, but for reasons I have delineated in chapter 10, engagement with the new perspective became unavoidable. All along, what has evoked my keen interest in Paul was the combination of the apostle's enduring (and controversial) legacy in the Christian tradition,¹ the interest of a good number of continental philosophers in his teaching² and the theological questions that emerged in that conversation for my own existential quest.

Over time, the problem that surfaced and that became the prism through which I attempted to make intelligible what Paul taught, was trying to figure out the question to which Jesus was the answer. If Jesus is indeed the answer, then what was the real issue, the quintessential question and the manifest predicament that his life “answered”? If Jesus was the solution, then what kind of crisis did his life have to solve? For years I had my reservations about the colloquial pronouncement that “Jesus came to die for our sins.” The more I engaged in the study of Paul, hermeneutics, philosophy and theology, the clearer became my vision that Jesus did not have to die a violent death for our sins. Rather, he died for our sin. There is a substantial difference in the fine distinction between sin (singular) and sins (plural.) In fact, I argue that this distinction is crucial for a robust understanding of Paul.

The core of this book is the attempt to make intelligible why this differentiation is not a matter of exegetical insight or perspectives where one

¹ Cf. Jürgen Becker, *Paulus. Der Apostel der Völker*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1989, 1: Paul's “Wirkungsgeschichte kann kaum überschätzt werden” (Paul's history of impact can hardly be exaggerated).

² For a first attempt of understanding Paul vis-à-vis contemporary philosophy, cf. Peter Frick (ed), *Paul in the Grip of the Philosophers. The Apostle and Contemporary Continental Philosophy*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2013.

position is to be preferred over another. For every human being, the existential structure of sin is not open to exegetical or theological debate. It is a fixed determinant, based on our ontological predispositions. This is the insight I gained from Heidegger and which I attempt to work out in these pages drawing on the hermeneutics of Gadamer and, to a lesser extent, the theological positions of Tillich and Bonhoeffer.

Given that the aim of this book is to make intelligible a framework for how we can *understand* Paul, and that means understand the apostle *existentially*, I will make the case that sin understood as an ontological-existential category (*Existenzial* in the tradition of Heidegger) must categorically correspond to the solution, offered in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The specific task for us is to make intelligible how there is a formal categorical correspondence between sin understood ontologically and the Messiah's death and resurrection. This correspondence is basic to the further distinction between the means and the mode of salvation. I will also briefly outline what my ontological reading of Paul means in existential terms of a life in faith as a "new creation" and in terms of an ethics for the other.

In many a preface in a book on Paul, it has become a commonplace to warn the reader of possible oversights of important works on the apostle, given the plethora of studies in the field. I *know* that this is the case in this monograph. My thinking about Paul and the ideas presented in these pages are the fruit of my intellectual quests and not in the first place a debate with secondary literature.

Nonetheless, any intellectual pursuit does not happen in a vacuum but in the context, to use a term Gadamer likes, of a *Gespräch*. For such conversation I thank my philosopher-friend Prof. Ricardo Quadros Gouvêa. He not only read and critiqued chapters 1–4, but given his keen sense of theology and philosophy, offered insights that helped me over the years to clarify my own quest for understanding Paul.

My deepest gratitude extends also to the staff at Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, especially to Henning Ziebritzki and Katharina Gutekunst in the early stages of the book, and to Tobias Stäbler and Susanne Mang for the professional and exemplary work of producing this work. I also wish to thank my colleagues Richard Myers and John Abraham for their support and interest in this book.

Last but not least, the book is dedicated to an existentialist par excellence – my brother. Words cannot do justice to describe the bond between us. It is all about existence in the deepest and fullest sense of Dasein.

Waterloo/Tobermory, Easter 2023

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	Anchor Bible Dictionary
BhTh	Beiträge zur historischen Theologie
<i>Bultmann</i> <i>Handbuch</i>	Christof Landmesser (ed). <i>Bultmann Handbuch</i> . Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2017
CCSP	James D.G. Dunn (ed), <i>The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003.
DBWE	<i>Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English</i> , 17 volumes. Edited by Wayne W. Floyd Jr., Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1996–2014.
EKK	Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
GA	Gesamtausgabe
GW	Gesammelte Werke
HUTh	Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
NIDNTTh	New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology
<i>Paulus</i> <i>Handbuch</i>	Friedrich W. Horn (ed). <i>Paulus Handbuch</i> . Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2013
RGG ⁴	Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, 4 th ed., Tübingen
RPT	Religion in Philosophy and Theology
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ThHwbAT	Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum alten Testament
ThWNT	Theologisches Wörterbuch zum neuen Testament
TSAJ	Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism
UTB	Uni-Taschenbücher
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZThK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

Understanding Paul

CHAPTER 1

The Questions of Pauline Hermeneutics

*Wer macht wen lebendig,
der Ausleger den Text
oder der Text den Ausleger?*
Ernst Fuchs¹

1.1 Thesis of the Book

At the outset of this book, I want to be clear and direct about the thesis of the study. It can be stated in one straightforward sentence: “For the apostle Paul, Christ/the Messiah is the answer to the predicament of sin, whereas sin is understood as an ontological-existential category.”² The task before us is to unpack this sentence in detail and bring to light the claims embedded in it. This thesis is grounded in the ontological reality and phenomenological observation that there is a vast difference between sin (singular) and sins (plural). The solution to this double-edged predicament must be a categorical correlation to both sin and sins. In our analysis, the answer to sin and sins is not the same; it *cannot* be the same. For ontological reasons, we can therefore only speak of salvation in Paul’s understanding when we consider that there must be a correspondence between sin and salvation on the same *categorical* level. In short, if sin is ontological, then salvation must offer an ontological solution. My thesis thus entails the claim that a non-ontological and non-existential understanding of sin in Paul is deficient and therefore significantly limits, even falsifies, our overall understanding of the apostle.

The fundamental assumption that sin is ontological starts with Paul’s own ideas in his letters and leaves deep traces in the reality of every human being, ancient and modern. For *every* living being, the ontological force of

¹ Ernst Fuchs, “Ereignis und Tatsache – die paulinische Aporie,” in *Marburger Hermeneutik*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1968, 205.

² Since I work in both English and German, here is the thesis statement in German: *Für Paulus ist der Christus/Messias die Antwort auf das Problem der Sünde, verstanden als ontologisch-existenziale Kategorie.*

sin has inevitable existential implications. In a broad sense, both Paul and the contemporary interpreter of Paul are trying to figure out how thinking about God and his presence in the world square up with the experience of the human condition in a universal scope, good and evil. To put it quite colloquially, in bumper sticker theology: “If Jesus is the answer,” then what is the question? To what issue, problem, reality, plight or predicament is Jesus the answer according to Paul, and by extension, the Christian tradition?

Specifically, it will be my task to make intelligible how the first part of the thesis statement, that the Messiah is the answer to sin, corresponds to the second part, namely the claim that sin must be understood in this rather elusive expression *ontological-existential category*. In chapter 2 we will discuss the details and depth of what it means to say that sin is primarily an ontological category and, therefore, has existential implications. For now, it suffices to point out that the expression “ontological-existential category” is my translation of a key concept in *Being and Time* of Martin Heidegger, the early Heidegger before the *Kehre* (turn). Heidegger employed the word *Existenzial* as a designation of universal ontological structures. The translators of *Being and Time* rendered Heidegger’s noun *Existenzial* as *existential(e)*³ while William Barret refers to it as *existentialia*.⁴ Whenever I employ the expression “ontological-existential category” or the abbreviated form “ontological category” or “existential category” I am referring to Heidegger’s ontological understanding of *Existenzial*.

Any understanding of Paul must reckon with the apostle’s passionate commitment to figure out how Jesus, the Christ, belongs to the history, presence and future of the Jewish people and, by Pauline extension, to all of humanity. It is basic to Paul’s thinking that somehow Christ as the Messiah is the answer to a human and cosmic plight. In that vein, in any comprehensive study of Pauline thought, the role of the Messiah must be a central question and one would expect that this topic receives front-page coverage, so to speak.⁵ But since the question of the Messiah *always* entails

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row 1962, cf. 537. Henceforth, all references to *Being and Time*, as well as to *Sein und Zeit*, are according to page number and not according to paragraphs.

⁴ William Barret, *Irrational Man. A Study in Existential Philosophy*. New York: Anchor Books 1990, 220.

⁵ Cf. Larry Hurtado, “Paul’s Christology,” in *CCSP*, 185–198. Hurtado rightly opens his study with these words, 185: “Paul’s beliefs about Jesus were at the centre of his religious commitment, and any attempt to understand Paul’s religious thought (or ‘theology’) has to make central what he believed about Jesus Christ.”

the question in what ways he may be thought of as the answer to the plight, one would also expect that a broad study of Paul includes the topic of sin as an important starting point and corollary, if not central topic. Curiously, in many Pauline studies the question of sin does not receive the critical emphasis it requires.⁶ Even worse, a clear delineation between sin and sins and what that distinction means for Pauline soteriology is largely misunderstood.⁷

The thesis statement also makes clear that I see sin as the problem to which the Christ/Messiah is the answer. Again, for the sake of clarity, let me point out that I do not see the topic of sin in Paul as a mere side issue or possibly an afterthought because the apostle worked from solution to plight.⁸ I am of the view that conceptually as well as existentially the apostle shaped his understanding of theology and life from solution to plight but *also* from plight to solution. His own hermeneutical circle was not linear but dynamic: Paul reflected on the anthropological dilemma of human existence while at the same time his anthropology was “the reflex of his soteriology.”⁹ What that means we will have to work out in detail as we progress. In this study, following a discussion of hermeneutics, I will address the issue of sin (plight) and then move on to discuss how sin understood as an existential category (*Esistenzial*) corresponds to Paul’s understanding of Jesus as the Messiah (solution). In other words, the methodological pathway I am employing is an ontological-existential analysis of life, *Dasein* in Heidegger’s terminology, regarding sin, sins and salvation. The specific

⁶ This is the case with many works on Paul including the new perspective on Paul. See for example N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* Oxford: Lion; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1997; N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 4. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2013. For a more detailed discussion of Wright’s view of sin in Paul, see chapter 10 below. A notable exception is E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism. A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1977. Sanders understands that Paul’s “basic distinction” is “between the plight as transgression and as bondage to sin” and that “they went together in Paul’s own view,” 509. Another exception is Terence L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles. Remapping the Apostle’s Convictional World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1997. He notes that Paul’s convictional “starting point” includes “the universality of sin,” 131.

⁷ Even studies on Paul who do discuss the issue of sin do not do so in the language suggested here. Not surprisingly, as far as I know, there is no study of Paul’s thought that has employed the phrase that “sin is ontological-existential” or an *Esistenzial*. See however the recent study by Steffi Fabricius, *Pauline Hermatology: Conceptualisation and Transferences*. HUTH 74. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2017. I will discuss this work below in chapter 3.

⁸ This depiction goes back to Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 443.

⁹ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 499, 510.

questions we will explore are the hermeneutical foundations for interpreting Paul theologically and philosophically, the categorical correspondence between sin and the Messiah, the nature and meaning of soteriology, the function of faith, the question of Torah and the grounding of ethics and the redeemed life. To repeat, all these questions will be examined through the lens of existential hermeneutics, some more directly than others.

1.2 Hermeneutical Construction

The kind of questions that must precede the interpretation of Paul's life and letters are hermeneutical questions. It is crucial at the outset of our study to insist that reflection on hermeneutical questions is not optional for the interpreter of Paul. For the conclusions we draw about Paul, and the overarching *understanding* we gain of him as a Jewish-Christian thinker, pivot to a great extent on the hermeneutical conjectures that are implicit in every scholar's work on the Pauline corpus. A first task, therefore, before one engages in the attempt to understand Paul, is to become self-conscious of and to clarify one's hermeneutical assumptions that are operative on various levels of interpretation. The objective of this first chapter is to articulate as precisely as possible the hermeneutic presuppositions that ought to be considered for every attempt to interpret Paul. Clarity in terms of hermeneutical principles is decisive for a reading and understanding of Paul that does justice both to the apostle in his Jewish-Christian context and the *contemporary* reader in his/her *Sitz im Leben*.

But before we turn our attention to the hermeneutical complexities that face us as Pauline interpreters, let me first illustrate by way of a metaphor what I am trying to make intelligible throughout this book. For the present purpose, let us employ the image of building a house as an analogy for hermeneutical construction, a metaphor we will come back to repeatedly. Acts 18:3 informs us that Paul was a tent-maker (σκηνοποιός). For our immediate purpose of illustration, let us say that he was roughly the equivalent of a construction worker. In one sense we may compare Paul's life, thought and theology to a house that he built during his lifetime. The apostle himself uses the metaphor of building a house. In 1 Cor. 3:10 he expounds: "according to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder (σοφὸς ἀρχιτέκτων) I laid a foundation (θεμέλιον), and someone else is building on it. Let each builder choose with care how to build on it." Many have built a house on a Pauline foundation, and we are now looking back at these houses after nearly 2000 years, realizing that different houses

have different Pauline features. There is, in the language of the metaphor, the issue of a suitable piece of land, a foundation that holds the entire superstructure and of course a myriad of additional features that make that house a distinctive “Pauline” house.

As we begin to construct *our* house, we scrutinize how Paul built his. We take note of the foundation, the building materials, the layout of the house, the functionality of the design, the aesthetic appeal and so on. As we consistently work away at our house, we recognize, however, that we do not merely want to copy Paul in every detail of his design. In many of our decisions we do not want to give up our own creative architectural intuitions. And so we modify Paul’s design – both in terms of design and building materials – and thus complete our construction. When all completed, we stamped our house with an unmistakable Pauline flavour while at the same time giving it our own personal touch. We did not merely copy Paul’s house; we built our own custom house.

But there is more to the metaphor. The foundation that we took over is Paul’s Judaism. This is crucial. In our metaphor of building our house, the importance of the foundation is twofold. First, the structure of the foundation is decisive for the durability of the house. As Jesus had already made clear before Paul,¹⁰ any compromise in terms of the foundation will eventually reveal itself as a structural deficit of the entire edifice. In the language of the metaphor, the foundation of Paul’s house is his unwavering commitment to Judaism, especially his unshakable conviction that there is but one God. Second, even though the foundation is crucial for the structural integrity of the whole house, very often the foundation of the house is only partially visible or not at all. On the sure foundation of Judaism, Paul added a new layer of a superstructure that he himself, I am arguing, saw also as belonging to Judaism, even though he had no precedent for this phase of the construction. In terms of his theological construction, it was the question of the role of the Messiah (cf. 1 Cor. 3:11 there is no foundation (θεμέλιον) other than Jesus the Messiah) and by extension the questions of Torah, Israel, Gentiles, new life etc.

Even more: hermeneutical construction does not allow us to merely copy. We do not simply build a replica of Paul’s house in our own time. We make decisions to change, add, delete, improve design and materials, all because Paul himself did not, or could not, complete what he himself had

¹⁰ Cf. Matt. 8:24–25: “everyone, then, who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock.

started. In other words, Paul could only build a certain house given the materials and resources that he had available to him. He could not do more than that. But we *are* in a different position. We can and must do more than what Paul did.

Why is this so?

Paul was not purely a historical figure and his writings relics for a biblical museum. His letters are not just documents of a now defunct understanding of the world and therefore rather irrelevant. The challenge and the task are precisely in working out an understanding of Paul's thought and life that does justice to both his unique and non-duplicable historicity *and* our contemporary existential reality. Even though we are speaking in the picture of building our house, for us such an undertaking is incredibly complex and requires a sober amount of clarity from the very beginning of our construction project.

1.3 Hermeneutics of Understanding

What is hermeneutics and what specifically is a hermeneutic of understanding? By way of definition, I do not understand the term hermeneutics only "as the formal rules controlling the practice of exegesis, but as something concerned with the total process of understanding."¹¹ Paul Ricoeur gives it an existential spin when he says that "hermeneutics is the very deciphering of life in the mirror of the text."¹² In other words, when I am using the term *hermeneutics* I am not referring to methodology, such as form criticism, textual criticism, redaction criticism, literary criticism, discourse analysis, syntactic or semantic markers or any other method or current New Testament approach, whatever it may be. The upshot of this is that I do not understand hermeneutics as if its main purpose is to illuminate only a specific text, or segment of a text, or the meaning of a semantic domain with a particular approach, theory or method.¹³ Important as various approaches may be in their own right, I am not primarily concerned

¹¹ Bernard C. Latagan, "Hermeneutics," in ABD 3, 152.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1980, 53. On Ricoeur's hermeneutic see Kathrin Messner, *Paul Ricoeurs biblische und philosophische Hermeneutik des Selbst. Eine Untersuchung aus theologischer Perspektive*. HUT 67. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2014.

¹³ Although I appreciate the approach by Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1971, I think it is overall too rigid. Nonetheless, Lonergan does emphasize understanding when he notes, 336: "The aim of systematics is not to increase certitude, but to promote understanding."

with exegetical details, but “the total process of understanding,” that is to say how exegetical minutiae fit into the picture of the much larger whole of understanding Paul’s thought, both textually and existentially.

Moreover, and more important, while incorporating some of the approaches mentioned above, hermeneutics goes far beyond the application of a specific method to a specific text. In a comprehensive sense, hermeneutics constitutes the total communicative process by which understanding of human existence comes to light. I mostly follow Hans-Georg Gadamer¹⁴ who characterizes Schleiermacher’s “wesentlichen Grundzug des Verstehens” (most foundational aspect of understanding) in these terms: “der Sinn des einzelnen [ergibt] sich immer nur aus dem Zusammenhang, mit-hin letztlich dem Ganzen” (individual sense emerges always from context, ultimately from the whole).¹⁵ That is to say that the hermeneutical task is anchored in the dynamic between part and whole, but always in the direction that the whole must make intelligent the part and not the part shedding some light on the whole. For the process of understanding, the whole is more significant than the parts. For our interpretation of Paul, this means that an understanding of Paul’s thought in its width and complexity is more important than mastering exegetical details. Schleiermacher’s view that understanding comes ultimately from the context of the whole thus always places exegetical particulars vis-à-vis Pauline theology in a subordinate position, and does so in a way that both objective and subjective aspects of interpretation find their legitimate place in understanding the whole.¹⁶

Gadamer is quick to add that Schleiermacher’s “Grundzug des Verstehens,” namely the tension between part and whole, does not only apply to formal matters such as grammar, exegesis, logic etc. but is equally true for the psychological dynamic of the interpreter. He notes that every intellectual construct (*Gedankengebilde*) is an instantiation of a specific moment within the total context (*Totalzusammenhang*) of a person’s life.¹⁷ Put differently, the interpreter always finds him/herself in the bind that every attempt at understanding is coloured by one’s psychological disposition and contemporary context (see section 1.4 below). But as Gadamer notes, there is also a logical quandary in the “Grundzug des Verstehens”: “logisch gese-

¹⁴ Cf. the recent study on Gadamer by Matthias Baum, *Die Hermeneutik Hans-Georg Gadamer als philosophia christiana. Eine Interpretation von “Wahrheit und Methode” in christlich-theologischer Perspektive*. HUTH 80. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2020.

¹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik. Hermeneutik I*. GW 1. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 5th ed, 1986, 193–194.

¹⁶ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 296.

¹⁷ Cf. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 194.

hen [ist] hier ein Zirkel... sofern das Ganze, von dem aus das einzelne verstanden werden soll, ja nicht vor dem einzelnen gegeben ist" (logically speaking there is a circle... inasmuch as the whole, through which the part should be understood, does not precede the whole).¹⁸ The problem presents itself in the issue that the interpreter always moves in both directions in the hermeneutic circle. The movement goes from whole to part, but also from part to whole. In Gadamer's words: "Grundsätzlich gesehen ist Verstehen immer ein Sichbewegen in solchem Kreise, weshalb die wiederholte Rückkehr von dem Ganzen zu den Teilen und umgekehrt wesentlich ist" (principally, understanding is always a movement in such a circle; therefore the continual return from the whole to the part and the reverse is significant).¹⁹ Elsewhere he says: "So läuft die Bewegung des Verstehens stets vom Ganzen zum Teil und zurück zum Ganzen" (the movement of understanding is always from whole to part and returns to the whole).²⁰ The power of the hermeneutic circle, according to Gadamer, lies then in the open-ended dialectic of repeatedly entering and leaving the circle, and thereby constantly gaining new insights and perspectives. Put differently, the hermeneutical circle becomes progressively larger.

But the dynamic, shifting and growing of the hermeneutical circle entails its own limit. Gadamer maintains that the whole is always relative and not absolute because it will never be in completion. But this then inextricably entails that there is always an intrinsic "Vorläufigkeit und Unendlichkeit" (provisionality and infinity)²¹ to every hermeneutical circle and interpretation. The preliminary and open-ended nature means that there is always the possibility for another nuance of interpretation or even a completely novel interpretation that like previous understandings grows out of the dynamic of part and whole. Though it may seem so, this inconclusive dynamic of the hermeneutical circle is not its weakness but its beauty and strength.²² Rather than being stuck in a static circle of interpretation, it allows for the fluid interaction between text and interpreter, ancient history and modern context, religious tradition and ideological matrix, void and eros, objectivity and prejudice, nihilism and meaning, life and death.

¹⁸ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 194.

¹⁹ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 194.

²⁰ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 296.

²¹ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 194; cf. 274.

²² Cf. the excellent discussion of the open-ended, fragmentary nature of history and hermeneutics in Lategan, Bernard C. "History, Historiography and Hermeneutics," in Pokorný and Roskovec (eds). *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*, 204–218. Lategan discusses, among others, Walter Benjamin ("his goal is to *show* history, not to *narrate* it. He wants to *display* events, not to *explain* them," 209) and Paul Ricoeur.

Hermeneutic understanding, finally, is at core the attempt to understand human existence by moving on the hermeneutical circle as outlined above. I am employing the semantic domain “understanding, to understand” in the sense it was suggested by Wilhelm Dilthey. Here I am drawing on the now classic distinction made by Dilthey between *explanation* and *understanding* and his hermeneutic theory that seeks to balance the insight of analytical detail, what for Schleiermacher is the part (for example, the specific details of Pauline exegesis) with an understanding of the whole (for example, Paul’s theology as a complex system of thought).²³ Gadamer, leaning on Schleiermacher, suggests that “nur im Rückgang auf die Entstehung von Gedanken lassen sich diese wirklich *verstehen*” (only by going back to the origin of thoughts can these be genuinely *understood*).²⁴ But the key here is precisely that a reconstruction of previous ideas, for example the theology of Paul, aims at *understanding* and not explanation. Though overlapping, a difference between the two is that explanation examines the “what” while understanding looks at the “why” of statements.

The distinction becomes also clear in another way. Gadamer himself claims that “was verstanden werden soll, ist in Wirklichkeit nicht ein Gedanke als ein Lebensmoment, sondern als eine Wahrheit” (that which is understood is in reality not a thought as a moment in life, but a truth).²⁵ In other words, it is not a fact, an explanatory detail etc. but the reality behind these facts as an expression of life itself that constitutes understanding. Only then can a fact become truth. Paul Ricoeur puts it this way. The interpretation of Pauline texts “and the interpretation of life correspond and are mutually adjusted.”²⁶ In other words, understanding is always operative in the dynamic between text and life. For this reason, Ricoeur speaks of an existential side to Paul’s own life when he notes that the apostle attempts “to decipher the movement of his own existence in the light of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ.”²⁷ This deciphering is nothing else but a hermeneutic of the “exegesis of human existence.”²⁸

²³ Cf. Wilhelm Dilthey, “Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*. Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner 1964, vol. 5, 332–336. But according to Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics, An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2004, 105, apparently Spener made this distinction before Dilthey.

²⁴ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 189 (my emphasis).

²⁵ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 189.

²⁶ Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 52.

²⁷ Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 52.

²⁸ Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 52.

Still another way of saying this is that the end point of understanding is living in the truth. But what that very notion – truth itself – means in an existential interpretation needs to be shown in the next chapter. Critical for our purpose is to hold on to Gadamer’s conception of a universality of hermeneutics that is predicated on Heidegger’s notion that *Verstehen* is an existential category (*Existenzial*).²⁹ If so, then *Verstehen* as an act has an existential-ontological structure (see below 2.2). Put differently, as human beings, *we cannot not seek* understanding and meaning because our very ontological human make-up drives us toward the search for meaning.³⁰ Gadamer articulates the existential element of understanding poignantly when he says: “die Fähigkeit des Verstehens [ist] eine grundlegende Ausstattung des Menschen, die sein Zusammenleben mit anderen trägt und insbesondere auf dem Wege über die Sprache und das Miteinander des Gespräches vonstatten geht. Insofern ist der universale Anspruch der Hermeneutik ausser allem Zweifel” (the ability for understanding is a basic human characteristic, which carries life with others and, by means of language, establishes intimacy in conversation. Thus, the universal claim of hermeneutics is beyond all doubt).³¹

In view of the existential element of understanding, to repeat, to *understand* Paul is not to explain what his background was, what he said grammatically, theologically and ethically, what he inherited from his Pharisaic background, what his changing conviction were and so on. To be sure, these things do matter, and we are not entitled to disregard them. Quite to the contrary. But these matters *alone* do not lead us to an understanding of Paul, nor do they lead to our contemporary understanding of the apostle. For the significance of the distinction between explanation and understanding is that the hermeneutical process aims at nothing less than the

²⁹ Michael Kirwan, “The Limits of Interpretation. The Gadamer – Habermas Conversation and its Implications for Philosophical Hermeneutics,” in Pokorný and Roskovec. *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*, 68–82. Cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 182: if we take “understanding as a fundamental *existentiale*, this indicates that this phenomenon is conceived as a basic mode of Dasein’s *Being*.” So also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Hermeneutik II, Ergänzungen, Register*. GW 2. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2nd ed, 1993, 331 speaks of “Heideggers Vertiefung des Begriffs des Verstehens zu einem Existenzial, d.h. zu einer kategorialen Grundbestimmung des menschlichen Daseins” (Heidegger’s deepening of the concept of understanding to an existential, i.e. to a categorical basic determination of human Dasein).

³⁰ Cf. Martin Šimsa, “The Question of Understanding and its Criteria in Conservative and Critical Hermeneutics,” in Pokorný and Roskovec. *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*, 59–67.

³¹ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode II*, 330.

total quest for understanding our *contemporary* existence as Pauline interpreters.

While we draw on the theology of the historical Paul (see below 1.5), we do so in view of our contemporary existence – this is all that we can do. It cannot be emphasized enough that the claim to understand Paul in contemporary perspective is not merely a tautological statement, but a claim that understanding – and correspondingly, meaning – can only be constructed existentially and theologically in the *present*. In the history of existential thinking, Søren Kierkegaard was the first to emphasize the significance of contemporaneity. “The past is not reality – for me,” insists Kierkegaard, but “only the contemporary is reality for me.”³² He goes on to contend that “historical Christianity is galimatias [i.e. non-sense] and unchristian confusion” because “true Christians... in each generation are contemporary with Christ” and paradoxically “His earthly life possesses the eternal contemporaneousness.”³³ Kierkegaard, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer³⁴ after him, quite clearly understood that Christianity is not about a retrieval of the historical Jesus or the historical Paul, but the appropriation of the disclosedness of truth³⁵ in one’s contemporary life and situation.

From a philosophical point of view, Giorgio Agamben takes Kierkegaard a step further. He comments on the “special relationship with the past” that we human beings have: “Contemporariness inscribes itself in the present by marking it above all as archaic. Only those who perceive the indices and signatures of the archaic in the most modern and recent can be contemporary. Archaic means close to the *arkhē*, that is to say, the origin.”³⁶ Agamben thus affirms that we cannot ignore the origin or the past, but that we must be mindful in how we retrieve the past in the present. Contemporariness is strictly speaking not a matter of chronological negotiation between past and present, but “more precisely, it is *that relationship with time*

³² Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, translated by Walter Lowrie, edited by John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne. New York: Vintage Books 2004, 58–59.

³³ Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 59.

³⁴ In the preface to *Discipleship*, the theme of the book is expressed in three crucial questions: “What did Jesus want to say to us? What does he want from us *today*? How does he help us to be faithful Christians *today*?”; cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English, vol. 4), edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, translated by Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2001, 37 (emphasis added).

³⁵ See Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 182–186, on how he understands Christ to be the truth within the distinction of truth as a way of being or result.

³⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, translated by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2011, 17.

that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism.”³⁷ Following Nietzsche to some degree, Agamben argues that the contemporary person “firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light but rather its darkness.”³⁸ He is not in any way suggesting that the contemporary has a negative or nihilistic outlook on life, but quite to the contrary, is grounded in alertness, even though “contemporaries are rare... [they] do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century and so manage to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights, of their intimate obscurity.”³⁹ Contemporary understanding is thus predicated on a critical hermeneutic that seeks to unmask the hiddenness characteristic of our search for meaning.

Giorgio Agamben sees such contemporariness in the apostle Paul when he announces in Kierkegaardian fashion that “the contemporariness par excellence... is messianic time, the being-contemporary with the Messiah.”⁴⁰ Agamben argues that Paul employed the expression the “time of the now,” *Jetztzeit*,⁴¹ in Greek ὁ νῦν καιρὸς (cf. Rom. 3:26). As Roland Boer argues, for Agamben the idea of *Jetztzeit* is likely a combination of several New Testament passages, such as 1 Cor. 7:1, Gal. 6:10, Eph. 5:16 and Col. 4:5.⁴² Still, Agamben’s point is that Paul’s perception of time as messianic *Jetztzeit* is “chronologically indeterminate” because it “has the singular capacity of putting every instant of the past in direct relationship with itself.”⁴³ For our interest in understanding Paul, this entails that we must be open to the un-hiding of the past in the sense that the past is not mere history or chronology but a challenge to the existential reality of our contemporariness, or in Agamben’s term, our own now-time.

Hans-Georg Gadamer also perceptively describes the issue of contemporariness and adds a detail that clarifies Kierkegaard and Agamben, a point that also applies to the understanding of Paul. Gadamer remarks that Kierkegaard characterized “die Wahrheit der christlichen Verkündigung”

³⁷ Agamben, *Nudities*, 11 (original emphasis).

³⁸ Agamben, *Nudities*, 13.

³⁹ Agamben, *Nudities*, 14.

⁴⁰ Agamben, *Nudities*, 18.

⁴¹ On *Jetztzeit*, see also Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains. A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, translated by Patricia Dailey. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2005, 143.

⁴² Roland Boer, “Paul of the Gaps. Agamben, Benjamin and the Puppet Player,” in Peter Frick (ed), *Paul in the Grip of the Philosophers. The Apostle and Contemporary Continental Philosophy*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2013, 57–67, here 64.

⁴³ Agamben, *Nudities*, 18.

(the truth of Christian proclamation) as *Gleichzeitigkeit*.⁴⁴ The term *Gleichzeitigkeit* (Danish: *samtidighed*) literally means “same time-ness” in the sense of the concurrence of times. The idea is that “der Abstand der Vergangenheit in Gleichzeitigkeit aufgehoben wird” (the distance to the past is taken up into concurrence).⁴⁵ This happens when the horizon of the past is melted with the horizon of the present. In this way the historical valence of the past is not negated while the emphasis is brought into the present horizon of understanding.⁴⁶

However, for Gadamer we do not merely engage a process of reconstructing the past for the present, but allow that the past addresses us as that “das wahr sein will” (want to be true), as that which “unmittelbar als wahr anspricht” (addresses us unconditionally as true).⁴⁷ In nuce, any understanding of the past, including the apostle Paul, is predicated on “was wir immer schon tun, indem wir sind” (what we always do because we are),⁴⁸ in other words the existential categories within which we are able to construct the meaning of the past in the present. We are, before we interpret. We interpret in the present.

So far, we may hold on to the following: Gadamer quite appropriately characterizes hermeneutics as “*Kunst* und nicht ein mechanisches Verfahren” (*art* and not a mechanical procedure).⁴⁹ We may say more precisely that hermeneutics is the art of understanding⁵⁰ our existence *contemporarily* and not as the technical application of specific methods.⁵¹ With regard

⁴⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Was ist Wahrheit?,” in *Wahrheit und Methode. Hermeneutik II*, GW 2, 44–56, here 55. Gadamer first introduced *Gleichzeitigkeit* in *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 126. For a discussion of *Gleichzeitigkeit* see also Baum, *Die Hermeneutik Hans-Georg Gadamer als philosophia christiana*, 64–67.

⁴⁵ Gadamer, “Was ist Wahrheit?,” 55.

⁴⁶ In a later essay Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode II*, 471, says that the concept of *Gleichzeitigkeit* “[ist] gerade nicht Allgegenwart im Sinne der historischen Vergegenwärtigung.”

⁴⁷ Gadamer, “Was ist Wahrheit?,” 55.

⁴⁸ Gadamer, “Was ist Wahrheit?,” 55.

⁴⁹ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 194 (original emphasis).

⁵⁰ Gadamer does indeed use the expression that hermeneutics is “*Kunst des Verstehens*,” cf. “Vom Zirkel des Verstehens,” in Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Hermeneutik II*, GW 2. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2nd ed, 1993, 57–65, here 57. In this regard it is not coincidental that Anslem defined theology as faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*) and that Bultmann gave the four volumes of his collected essays the title *Faith and Understanding (Glaube und Verstehen)*. For both thinkers, faith is trust in God to be sure, but the task of understanding faith points to its content and substance.

⁵¹ See also Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Die Kunst des Verstehens. Grundzüge einer Hermeneutik der Kommunikation durch Texte*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018 and Günter Fi-

to Paul, as we shall see, hermeneutics is the art of understanding Paul's life and thought in all its fragmentary complexities and literary⁵² dispositions vis-à-vis our own attempts to understand our existence within its *contemporary* boundaries and opportunities.

1.4 Hermeneutic Prejudice

No hermeneutic construction of understanding the apostle Paul happens in an objective vacuum.⁵³ This is to say that every Pauline interpreter has either an implicit or explicit hermeneutical constellation of assumptions, even if the term hermeneutics is not used to describe one's approach to Paul. What a scholar brings to the interpretation of Paul may be called presuppositions. But no set of scholarly hermeneutical presuppositions are objective. With respect to Pauline thought, this is to allege that every person who reads Paul and wishes to understand him brings a set of assumptions to the letters that are unique to the interpreter. These are things such as age, gender, social location, education, religious convictions, intellectual ability, ideological predilections, personal experience, emotional needs and so on. In other words, every "Paulusinterpretation stellt ein Modell dar, das auf der Basis von Vorentscheidungen entworfen wurde" (every interpretation of Paul constitutes a model which was designed on the basis of preliminary decisions).⁵⁴ Every model of interpretation is unavoidably constructed out of the *prejudiced* assumptions – conscious and unconscious conceptions, categories, values – that the interpreter brings to Paul with his or her unique individuality which itself is situated, to repeat Gadamer, in the *Totalzusammenhang* of a person's life.⁵⁵ Every reader of Paul

gal, *Verstehensfragen. Studien zur phänomenologisch-hermeneutischen Philosophie*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009.

⁵² Cf. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 270–274 who, following Heidegger, says the following regarding the interpretation of texts, 273: "Wer einen Text verstehen will, ist vielmehr bereit, sich etwas von ihm sagen zu lassen. Daher muss ein hermeneutisch geschultes Bewusstsein für die Andersheit des Textes von vornherein empfänglich sein" (Rather, those who want to understand a text are prepared to let it tell them something. Therefore, a hermeneutically trained awareness of the otherness of the text must be open-minded from the outset).

⁵³ See for example the essay by Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" in Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, selected, edited and translated by Schubert M. Ogden. Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1984, 145–153.

⁵⁴ Udo Schnelle, "Methodische Probleme der (Re)konstruktion der Theologie aus den erhaltenen Paulusbriefen," in *Paulus Handbuch*, 277.

⁵⁵ Cf. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 194.

is embedded in a complex set of personal and cultural presuppositions that inform his or her reading and understanding of Paul. No reader can escape these preconditions of reading. The upshot of all of this is that every commentator is inescapably drawn *into* the hermeneutical circle; no construal of Paul is free of preconditions and, hence, there is no such thing as a neutral, objective or conclusive understanding of Paul.

To take the above point further, it is crucial to note that strictly speaking it may even be problematic to speak of hermeneutical presuppositions. For, as Gadamer has convincingly argued, there are no such things as neutral assumptions; all presuppositions, however “objective” the interpreter may think of them, are always what he calls “prejudices,” *Vorurteile*.⁵⁶ Gadamer claims that the term prejudice received its negative connotation only with the Enlightenment. Originally, a prejudice was true to its etymology and suggested a pre-judgement before the final judgement or definitive conclusion. A prejudice was thus synonymous with a preliminary stage or an early verdict along the way and in view of the conclusion of an argument or train of thought.⁵⁷ Thus up to the Enlightenment, a prejudice – from Latin *praeiudicium* (*Vorentscheidung*) – was not necessarily a “falsches Urteil” (an incorrect judgment) but could have both negative and positive connotations. But post-Enlightenment and post-Cartesian thought recast a “Vorurteil” as “unbegründetes Urteil” (unsubstantiated judgment) that lacks “methodische Sicherung” (methodological rigor).⁵⁸ It is thus apparent that a methodologically unsubstantiated prejudice was at best seen as speculative and at worst as mere opinion. This is true for the post-Enlightenment understanding of science, but also the humanities including theology and philosophy.

Does this mean that all hermeneutic approaches are doomed to fail since it is impossible to shake off prejudices? Not at all. “Hier hat das hermeneutische Problem seinen Ansatzpunkt” (here we find the hermeneutical starting point) says Gadamer, and continues: “Es bedarf einer grundsätzlichen Rehabilitierung des Begriffs des Vorurteils und einer Anerkennung dessen, dass es legitime Vorurteile gibt, wenn man der endlich-geschichtlichen Seinsweise des Menschen gerecht werden will (we need a fundamental rehabilitation of the term prejudice and the recognition that there are legitimate prejudices, in view of doing justice to the finite-historical mode of being human).”⁵⁹ But if it is indeed the case that there are legitimate preju-

⁵⁶ Cf. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 281–290.

⁵⁷ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 275.

⁵⁸ Cf. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 275, cf. 276–281.

⁵⁹ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 281.

dices, then the question arises – for Gadamer, the “erkenntnistheoretische Grundfrage” (epistemological key question)⁶⁰ – by what criteria we are able to determine which prejudices are legitimate and which are not. Concerning Paul, the question is precisely whether there are specific prejudices that are more valid than others? The full answer to this question will become apparent as we continue to develop our thoughts.

For now, it must suffice to merely indicate the path suggested by Gadamer. Even though the Enlightenment was correct in challenging the hegemony of authority and accepted the autonomy of reason, in so doing it also deconstructed the notion of authority itself as a prejudice. But that too is problematic. Gadamer suggests, following the hermeneutical insights of the Reformation, that authority contains “die Möglichkeit übernatürlicher Wahrheit” (possibility of transcendent truth)⁶¹ and is therefore open-ended as a prejudice. But the line from prejudice to truth is not a straight one. In order to make Paul’s thought comprehensible, we will draw on Heidegger’s ontological understanding of truth (see chapter 2) and demonstrate how it can shed light on Pauline thinking without distorting it.

Above we referred to Schleiermacher’s “Grundzug des Verstehens” and the fact that this *Grundzug* implies the psychological makeup of the interpreter and operates within the total context (*Totalzusammenhang*) of a person’s life.⁶² We also noted that our psychological dispositions decisively determine how we construct understanding, an understanding that is always preliminary as we move along bi-directionally in the hermeneutical circle. Whatever we may think and feel about our personal rootedness, our emotional intelligence and our intellectual maturity – all these things are of necessity unique to us and not others and therefore remain preliminary. But there is more to it. It is one thing that our psychological traits colour our understanding, but now we must add that these same traits are also no more than *prejudices*. The same is true for our methodological assumptions and approaches we bring to Paul. They, too, are *prejudices*. We may argue all we want about their logical appropriateness and coherence, but in the end any method is also a prejudice. Nonetheless, in view of Gadamer’s understanding that prejudices are preliminary inferences in view of a conclusion, we are entitled to make the case to hold our own prejudices. I will do so in the next chapter.

By now it seems to be clear that there is no such thing as a neutral hermeneutics. Objective neutrality in hermeneutics is a myth. All hermeneu-

⁶⁰ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 281.

⁶¹ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 282.

⁶² Cf. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 194.

tical presuppositions are prejudices or, to speak with Bultmann, they are “preunderstandings.”⁶³ In principle, this is not a problem, at least not the main problem. The real problem materializes when we claim exclusivity with our psychological and methodological approaches at the expense of others. This is crucial. To claim that all Pauline interpretations are tainted non-objectively is not to say that they are of no value, distorted or even false. Non-objective interpretations are simply interpretations that cannot lay claim to a definitive, ultimate and never-changing understanding of Paul. And this includes *all* interpretations – ancient, medieval, modern, old perspective, new perspective, postmodern, contemporary and existential.

It bears repeating to insist that the problem is not to read Paul by means of a theological, philosophical or ideological imposition or filter. The real problem is to be ignorant of one’s own filter and lens and as a result to think that one’s reading constitutes a reading of the historical Paul and his teaching. Crucial is therefore to move away from a mere default hermeneutic to a clear articulation of one’s self-reflected and self-conscious hermeneutical pre-suppositions and prejudices. Both promise and peril are always embedded in a hermeneutical self-conscious reading. The peril is the danger of distortion and falsification of Paul’s “intended message.” The promise is that of a new pathway, a new course of insight and clarification that is otherwise difficult to ascertain. But most of all, the promise lies in making the ancient message of Paul heard in our contemporary context so that it facilitates, to speak with Bonhoeffer, “the coming of grace.”⁶⁴ In sum, the first step in terms of hermeneutical integrity is therefore that we must be self-aware and knowledgeable of our prejudices and understand how they shape, alter and possibly at times distort our understanding of Paul and his thought. As Gadamer puts it, the hermeneutical challenge is not that we have prejudices, but that we have “undurchschaute Vorurteile” (unrecognized prejudices).⁶⁵

1.5 The Historical Paul

I asserted above in 1.3 that a hermeneutic of *understanding* is not a mere description of Paul’s life and teaching, but nothing less than an *under-*

⁶³ Rudolf Bultmann, “The Problem of Hermeneutics,” in Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 69–93, here 72–74.

⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Ethics*. Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2005, 162.

⁶⁵ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 274.

standing of how Paul's way of *being human* encroaches on our way of being human. If understanding Paul is in fact our aim, then we are faced with the question of what role the *historical* Paul⁶⁶ and his teaching play in our *contemporary* understanding of existence. In the metaphor of building our house, we cannot simply usurp Paul's teaching in a preferential manner as if his teachings were a quarry from which we may just take the useful stones for our foundation and leave alone the ones we do not really like.

1. *Historical Distance.* It is a basic hermeneutical insight to acknowledge the historical gap between us and history⁶⁷ and therefore also between Paul and us. History for us is past and foreign and thus historical distance cannot naively be ignored or overcome. We cannot simply uncover a nearly 2000-year historical gap as if the difference between ancient event and us was insignificant in view of our desire to understand Paul. History cannot simply be integrated into our contemporary world of thought as if there is a straight line from the distant past to the present, as if there were transferable continuity between us and the past. History as such is past, but the understanding of that history is always present. Gadamer terms that interpretive step nicely a "späteres historisches Nachurteil" (a later historical post-judgment).⁶⁸

Udo Schnelle is right on the mark when he declares that "jede Interpretation historischer Schriften ist ein Konstruktionsvorgang, denn Vergangenheit begegnet uns nicht 'an sich,' sondern immer nur im Modus gegenwärtiger Aneignung" (every interpretation of historical writings is a constructive process because we encounter the past not 'as such' but always in the mode of present appropriation).⁶⁹ This is a key insight. The past cannot be retrieved "as such" but only in the mode of *contemporary* "Aneignung." In other words, the line between the present and the past is always curved and broken. There is no uninterrupted continuity as if the past has one meaning that is unchangeably true and valid for all generations to follow. Such a view of the past would render history static and not dynamic. Rather, the past must be interpreted always anew, in every generation and for

⁶⁶ Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, "The Historical Jesus and the Theology of Paul," in Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding I*, 220–246.

⁶⁷ Cf. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 296–305. In a later 1985 essay, Gadamer somewhat revises his view of the "Zeitenabstand" or "geschichtlichen Abstand" and prefers to speak instead of the hermeneutical significance of the (non-historical) "Abstand" as such and the "Andersheit des anderen;" cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Zwischen Phänomenologie und Dialektik – Versuch einer Selbstkritik," in Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode II*, 3–23, here 8–9.

⁶⁸ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode I*, 287.

⁶⁹ Udo Schnelle, "Methodische Probleme," 273.

every interpretive attempt. This is the case for all historical studies, including the study of the biblical narratives and the thought of Paul.

2. *Historical Interpretation is Always Reconstruction.* To refer to Schnelle once more, we just noted that “Vergangenheit begegnet uns nicht ‘an sich,’ sondern immer nur im Modus gegenwärtiger Aneignung” because “jede Interpretation historischer Schriften ist ein Konstruktionsvorgang.”⁷⁰ The hermeneutic reason is clear: every “Paulusinterpretation stellt ein Modell dar, das auf der Basis von Vorentscheidungen entworfen wurde” (every interpretation of Paul is a model that is based on pre-decisions).⁷¹ In other words, since every *Vorentscheidung* is always also a prejudice, it follows that every interpretation of the Pauline letters is necessarily a subjective hermeneutical undertaking and not an objective and pure historical reconstruction. The nature of that hermeneutical undertaking is precisely that it is one of reconstruction. *It is not objective history that is reconstructed but our subjective and preferential understanding of history.* We can only appropriate history in the mode of interpretation and understanding. For that reason, any attempt to understand Paul constitutes always a fresh attempt to understand him in the context of his history, or more precisely in the historical gap between the past and the present, in the gap that separates him and us.

The position of reconstruction is always that of a retrospective lens, but a retrospective that is situated in the present. Schnelle says it well: “Die eigentliche Zeitstufe des Auslegers ist immer die Gegenwart, in die er untrennbar verwoben ist und deren kulturelle Standards das Verstehen des gegenwärtigen Vergangenen entscheidend prägen” (the given timeline of the interpreter is always the present, in which s/he is inseparably interwoven and whose cultural standards critically determine the understanding of the contemporary past).⁷² In view of Paul this means: “Es gibt immer nur den ‘Paulus’ des Interpreten/der Interpretin, und deshalb ist es mehr als natürlich, dass es eine Vielzahl von Paulusbildern gibt” (there is only the ‘Paul’ of the interpreter, and for this reason it is natural that there is a multiplicity of Pauline explanations).⁷³ Even though it seems self-evident, it is significant enough to reiterate that the subjective nature of interpretation vis-à-vis historical events will always and necessarily be a reconstruction based on the interpreters personal hermeneutic prejudices. No *subjective* understanding of history can *objectively* reconstruct it.

⁷⁰ Udo Schnelle, “Methodische Probleme,” 273.

⁷¹ Udo Schnelle, “Methodische Probleme,” 277.

⁷² Udo Schnelle, “Methodische Probleme,” 273.

⁷³ Udo Schnelle, “Methodische Probleme,” 274.

3. *The Historical Paul cannot be Reconstructed.* For us this means that no subjective understanding of Paul can viably reconstruct his historical context. The hermeneutical attempt to reconstruct Paul is the endeavour to understand both the markers and content of Paul's thought. But it is not an attempt to retrieve history as such. There is no such thing as retrieving history; it is an illusion to believe so. Bultmann saw quite correctly "dass es eine Rekonstruktion der wirklichen Geschichte nicht geben kann" (that a reconstruction of actual history is impossible).⁷⁴ Neither is there a necessary historical development as in Idealist philosophy, nor a timeless reflection of history as in Positivism. Hence, the retrieval of the historical Paul is not our goal.

In fact, I am suggesting that *any* attempt to understand Paul – by virtue of the mere fact that it can only be an understanding that originates from our *contemporary* perspective – cannot have a historical reconstruction of his life or his theological thinking as the end point. To repeat, there is no such thing as retrieving history, as if the retrieval of the historical Paul were the chief objective of Pauline studies; it is a misconception to think so. Historical description does not automatically mean contemporary intelligibility. In this regard it needs to be said that to understand Paul is precisely *not* to know "what Paul really said."⁷⁵ It is, in my view, dangerous to make such a claim because it is hermeneutically false. We do well to deconstruct the "what Paul really said" or "what Paul really meant" myths, be it Paul the church-builder, the Pharisee, the apostle to the Gentiles,⁷⁶ the empire-resistor, the apocalyptic thinker, the second founder of Christianity, the founder of Christian theology, the misogynist, the Marxist, the liberal, conservative, atheist, Lutheran, Catholic, secular or whatever Paul. All caricatures without exception depend on hermeneutical prejudices and filters. To be sure some of these portrayals are correct, overlap and intersect; but they are not all equal when it comes to understanding Paul and our contemporary existence. Once again, they highlight that *the historical Paul will always and necessarily remain a construct.*⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Problem einer Theologischen Exegese des Neuen Testaments," in Andreas Lindemann (ed). *Neues Testament und Christliche Existenz*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2002, 13–38 (original 1925), here 28.

⁷⁵ See for example N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* Oxford: Lion; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1997.

⁷⁶ For Paul's own self-designation, cf. Gal. 1:1, 2:8; Rom. 1:5, 11:13.

⁷⁷ On the interrelation between history, historiography and a hermeneutic of the New Testament, see Jens Schröter, "Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Historiographie und Hermeneutik in der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft," 191–203, here 193, in Pokorný and Roskovec (eds), *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*.

4. *Understanding Beyond History.* How then do we move through history to understanding Paul? To be sure, understanding is not the same as believing in the historical Paul or believing in the timeless historicity of the teachings of Paul. We do not understand Paul because we can provide information and descriptions about his past life and teaching. Bultmann insists that there is a vast difference between “what is said” (*Gesagtem*)” and “what is meant” (*Gemeintem*).⁷⁸ Understanding aims at what is meant, but always by way of what is said. It is clear, then, that understanding happens in the open-ended interpretive tension with the biblical text. We will return to the question of text and Word in the next chapter. Suffice it to say here that from the point of understanding the speech-event⁷⁹ of the text/Word is not merely a “historical revelation.”⁸⁰ Rather, we understand Paul because we are part of the speech-event that he articulates and we interpret in a self-conscious, self-reflective and critical hermeneutic that seeks the truth of the speech-event itself and not the bearer of its words. The memory of the speech-event of the Word is not merely a recollection of a past event but its transformative and life-giving power.⁸¹ In other words, a mere historical knowledge of Paul (even if it would be possible) would not do justice to the word-happening and speech-event character of the Word by which understanding opens for us.

It follows that we are not only entitled to think beyond Paul, but that it is our responsibility, theologically, to go beyond Paul. To claim that we must go beyond Paul to *understand* Paul is not saying at all that we are going against Paul. The apostle provided much indeed about our understanding of the life of Jesus the Messiah, but he did not provide everything. Paul was fully engaged in the hermeneutic process of making sense of Je-

⁷⁸ Bultmann, “Das Problem einer Theologischen Exegese des Neuen Testaments,” 19.

⁷⁹ Baum, *Die Hermeneutik Hans-Georg Gadamer als philosophia christiana*, 236: “Verstehen ist Geschehen (understanding is event).”

⁸⁰ Ingolf Dalferth, “Ereignis und Transzendenz,” in *ZThK* 110 (2013), 475–500, here 491.

⁸¹ Dalferth, “Ereignis und Transzendenz,” 490, offers a perceptive illustration of the speech-event: “Wie Musik nicht am Instrument, sondern im Ohr des Hörers entsteht, so ereignet sich das Sprach-Ereignis nicht per se, sondern am Ort derer, die es als bestimmtes Ereignis vernehmen: *Das verstehende Erleben des Ereignisses ist dessen verständliches Sichereignen*, und umgekehrt. Das heisst: Das Ereignis geschieht nicht zunächst und wird dann interpretiert, es geschieht *als* Interpretation” (just as music does not originate at the instrument but in the ear of the listener, the speech-event does not occur per se but at the place of those who hear it as a specific event: *the comprehending experience of the event is its comprehensible happening to itself*, and vice versa. That means: The event does not happen first and is then interpreted; it happens *as* interpretation).