

01. Letter to Titus Introduction



Author of the Letter to Titus

The author introduces himself as Paul and there is no evidence from the early church or, indeed, for the first eighteen hundred years of the church's life, of any dispute about the identity of the author. However, modern critical scholarship has brought us to the situation today in which most scholars either argue or assume that someone other than Paul composed the Letter to Titus (as well as both Letters to Timothy) in his name.

There is nothing inherently problematic about this suggestion provided it is understood that this was the way which a faithful disciple of Paul chose to convey what he understood to be Paul's authentic thoughts about church organisation and government and about what was important in the life of the communities of Crete to whom this letter is addressed. In keeping with the practice of the times, it is possible that a disciple of Paul wrote in Paul's name in order to remind people that the martyred Paul was still present among them, inspiring them by his teaching and active in the life of the church.

However, after two hundred years of scholarly debate, some scholars continue to argue that Paul is, in fact, the author. First, nothing in what is written requires a situation significantly different in time from the period just before Paul's death. Secondly, a number of considerations favour this time rather than late in the century. The stress placed on the authority of Paul's representative indicates a less developed stage of local leadership than we find, for example, in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch, composed in the early years of the second century.

More significantly, this letter envisages a situation in which there is still an expectation of growth and development in Jewish Christian communities. This was not the case in the latter decades of the first century.

Furthermore, the various problematic situations mentioned can be paralleled from Paul's other correspondence.

The content could have been written in the mid-sixties and could have been written to Crete as the letter claims. If it can be established by other criteria that someone else composed the letter, the above considerations point to its author writing soon after Paul's death.

Still focusing on the content, we ask a second question: Could what is said have been said by Paul, or does it reveal an author with different ideas, different values, different concerns? The fact that the Letter to Titus was accepted for so long as being written by Paul is itself an indication that it not only does not contradict Paul's thought, but that it has been read as being consistent with it.

It has a special and limited focus and aim. It is written to a church leader, Titus, precisely in his role as pastor. It contains advice and instruction about his responsibility as Paul's representative in his guiding of the community in living a Christian life. Ministry and ethics are central. This focus is adequate explanation for the special content and vocabulary.

Some find it strange that Paul would write to an intimate co-worker in such a relatively impersonal and formal way. We should note, however, that the author clearly intends the letter to be read to the congregations. It functions as a guarantee that Paul stands behind the authority of the leader. It is written to support Titus and as instruction for those for whom he is exercising care.

Ignatius of Loyola, for example, writes differently when he is sending a personal letter of encouragement to a fellow Jesuit, and when he is writing a rule of life to be followed. We might assume that most of what Paul writes in this letter was already known by Titus after years working closely with Paul. Paul might sound as though he is instructing Titus, but he is rather instructing the communities to expect this kind of instruction and leadership from him.

In his excellent introduction to the Anchor Bible commentary on Titus (1990), Jerome Quinn writes: 'Titus and Timothy are models of Paul and models for believers as they are designated to carry on the apostle's work, carry out his commands, imitate his sufferings, teach his gospel and practise it themselves, preside at the liturgy, receive material support for their ministerial work, and choose other men who in their turn will share their apostolic ministry' (*The Letter to Titus*, page 15).

If the content is Pauline, what about the style? Could Paul have written in this way? The special vocabulary is not a problem. It is adequately explained by the focus and content of the letter. Paul's use of certain technical words that are not in his usual vocabulary can be adequately explained without having recourse to the hypothesis of another author.

Scholars note the lack of many of the connecting particles that we are accustomed to find in Paul's writing. However, this, too, can be explained by the focus of the letter. In his other letters which are written to communities, Paul is often arguing certain points. This is not the case here. Titus knows why Paul is insisting on certain things. Paul's purpose is to state what is to be done in acting decisively to strengthen the communities of Crete against divisive ideas that are undermining the gospel. There is no need for the many particles that would have been needed in the cut and thrust of argument.

Paul is laying down policy concerning government to ensure a continuance of the kind of authority that is needed when he himself is no longer around. One would expect a certain impersonality, a certain formality, a certain lack of spontaneity as he expresses principles to which he has given much thought.

It is unusual for Paul to put so much stress on tradition, rather than on his own divine commission. Perhaps, knowing that he will not be with them much longer (for reasons of age, health, threat to his life), he purposely stresses tradition which will still be there when he is gone, and which is not dependent on his personal presence.

Jerome Quinn favours the idea that the Letter to Titus was composed by a disciple after Paul's death. I. Howard Marshall's conclusion to his lengthy and balanced treatment of this subject in the 1999 International Critical Commentary agrees.

If Quinn and Marshall and many other scholars are correct in assigning this letter to a disciple rather than to Paul, we must not forget that it was the author's intention that those reading the letter would do so as though they were listening to Paul himself. The intention was to reproduce what Paul himself would have said were he still alive. We should remember that this is how this letters was read down through the centuries, and why it was preserved, treasured, copied and distributed.

We hear Paul's concern that Christians in the various communities, Jewish and Gentile, remain in communion by being faithful to the tradition which they have received.

We hear his concern that they remain in communion with other Christians by their love and by maintaining unity in the church.

We hear his concern that they remain in communion as they hold firm to the gospel in the hope of sharing Jesus' eternal communion with God in the glory that awaits them.

Perhaps the strongest call that we hear is that Christians continue the mission of proclaiming the gospel to the world, for Paul is passionately convinced that 'God wills every person to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4). It is for this reason that he seeks to support the authority of the leader against false teaching that could undermine this mission.

While accepting that the Letter to Titus may well have been composed by a disciple of Paul, I have not found their arguments conclusive and so prefer to stay with the tradition that Paul himself was its author.

If in fact Paul is the author, it is necessary to accept the tradition that Paul was released from house arrest in Rome at the end of the statutory two years, and that he returned east. He expressed the hope that this would happen in his Letter to the Philippians, composed probably while in house arrest in Rome. While back in the east, Paul wrote the Letter to Titus before he was once again taken to Rome, imprisoned and martyred.

Eusebius, writing in the opening years of the fourth century, has this to say: 'After defending himself, the Apostle was again sent on the ministry of preaching, and coming a second time to the same city suffered martyrdom under Nero.' (*History of the Church*, 2.22).

Titus is not mentioned by Luke in his *Acts of the Apostles*. The first time we hear of him is in Paul's Letter to the Galatians (2:1). Paul took Titus with him to a private meeting in Jerusalem with the leaders of the Christian community there. Paul wanted them to meet a Gentile member of the Antioch community. The result of that meeting was that they agreed it was not necessary to be a circumcised Jew to be a Christian. People like Titus could join the community as Gentiles.

Titus also features in the Letters written by Paul from Macedonia to the community in Corinth. Paul had sent Titus ahead to Corinth to try to sort out the misunderstandings they had about Paul, and also to organise a collection for the poor in Jerusalem.

Paul writes: 'As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker in your service' (2 Corinthians 8:23).

In his Second Letter to Timothy Paul mentions that 'Titus is in Dalmatia' (2 Timothy 4:10).

At the time of Paul's writing, Titus is the leader of the Christian communities in Crete. Jews from Crete were among those who were present in Jerusalem on the occasion of the first Pentecost (see Acts 2:11). Paul spent a brief time in Crete on his journey to Rome in the late autumn of 59AD (see Acts 27:8-12). Whether it was because of what he saw there or for some other reason, this letter indicates that, on his return east from imprisonment in Rome, Paul spent some time in Crete and left Titus in charge.

From sources outside the New Testament we know that there were many Jews on Crete, so it is also likely that the Christians there were mainly converts from Judaism (1:10,14). This fits with the content of this letter. Paul is concerned, as we will see, with ideas that are being urged by a certain party of Jewish Christians, ideas which are contrary to the gospel and which are disrupting the community. Paul is instructing Titus to appoint leaders who can teach sound doctrine, as that is the best way to counter error.

65AD

Letter to Titus

(from Nicopolis
to Crete)

(To young,
mainly Jewish,
communities)

