



The Pastoral Epistles

The Pastoral Epistles are three short letters written in Paul's name to two of his close associates, Timothy and Titus. The letters are probably compositions by followers after his death, although there are scholars who hold that either or both 2 Timothy and Titus were written by the apostle while 1 Timothy, which displays important differences in style from Paul's major letters, was written later. As we have noted in the start of this Bible study producing such letters in the name and imitating the voice of a respected teacher was a feature of the literary scene of the time. These letters, whether pseudepigraphical or in part authentic are concerned with challenges confronting communities of believers, particularly matters of doctrinal fidelity, church order, and the behavior expected of the faithful.

Paul and the Addressees

The Pastorals present vignettes of Paul that have helped shape his image through Christian history. In 1 Timothy he reminds his disciple that was "a blasphemer, persecutor and a man of violence" (1 Tim 1:13), but a recipient of God's mercy who became an example to believers (1:11). In 2 Timothy Paul appears near the end of his life, in chains in Rome (2 Tim 1:17; 2:9), having made one defense (2 Tim 4:16). He looks back on a long apostolic career (1:11; 2:20; 3:11) and observes that he has fought the good fight and finished the race (4:7), alone but for the presence of Luke (4:11). The imagery here corresponds to what Paul says in his letters and to the reports in the Book of Acts, which ends with him in Roman confinement.

The recipients of the letters are known from Paul's authentic letters. Timothy was a "collaborator" of Paul (Rom 16:21; cf. 1 Cor 1:19), an emissary to Pauline congregations (1 Cor 4:17; 16:10; 1 Thess 3:2, 6; Phil. 2:19), and the co-author of several epistles (1 Thessalonians, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon). According to Acts, while Timothy had a Jewish mother, he

was circumcised by Paul (Acts 16:1). He was with Paul in Greece (Acts 17:14–15 and 18:5), was sent by Paul to Macedonia from Ephesus (Acts 19:22) and accompanied Paul on a similar route (Acts 20:4). 2 Timothy adds the name of his mother, Eunice, and grandmother, Lois (2 Tim 1:5) and notes that Timothy was well educated in the "sacred writings" from childhood (2 Tim 3:15).

Paul mentions that Titus was an uncircumcised gentile convert (Gal 2:1, 3). He served as Paul's emissary to Corinth, collecting support for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Cor 7:13–14; 8:6, 16) and helping to mend fences between Paul and the Corinthians after a breakdown in their relationship (2 Cor 2:13; 7:6). His epistle places him on the island of Crete where he serves as bishop (Tit 1:5, 7), and from which he is urged to come to the Greek city of Nicopolis (Tit 3:12).

Structure of the Letters

1 Timothy displays a carefully balanced structure, best represented as a "chiastic" or ring composition:

Greeting 1:1–2

General Exhortation 1:3–19

Detailed Issues

On Prayer 2:1–19

On Bishops and Deacons 3:1–13

Celebrating the Mystery of Piety 3:14–16

On Leaders 4:1–16

On Social Roles, elders, widows, slaves and masters. 5:1–6:2

General Exhortation 5:3–19

Farewell 6:20–21

2 Timothy, though much shorter, is similarly organized:

Greetings 1:1–2

Thanksgiving 1:3–14

Admonitions to Timothy 2:1–4:5

Paul's situation and greetings 4:5–18

Farewell 4:19–22

Titus has the typical epistolary greetings (1:1-4) and conclusion (3:15–16), but a more linear treatment of its themes of maintaining correct belief (1:14; 2:11–15), responsibility to the community (2:1–10) and appropriate behavior (3:1–14).

Style

The Pastorals generally, and 1 Timothy in particular, exhibit a more didactic style and formal tone than the authentic Pauline letters. Sentiments such as "the Law is good if one uses it legitimately" (1 Tim 1:8) sounds trite, but it may attempt to capture some of Paul's efforts to reconcile his gospel with the Torah, an issue that occupies much of his energy in Romans. Moral principles are stated in a traditional proverbial fashion, as in the note that "a love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim 6:10) or the general admonition to live a moral life, "that you may fight the good fight having faith and a good conscience." Theological principles too are condensed into pithy summaries: "(God) desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4), or the "saying" that is "sure" "if we have died with him, we will also live with him, etc." (2 Tim 2:11–13), or the oft-cited comment on scripture: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful [*or all scripture inspired by God is also useful*], for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 2:16).

Contentious Issues

The Pastorals deal with several topics apparently controversial at the time. Some of the vaguer allusions have intrigued scholars, such as the reference to "myths and genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training" (1 Tim 1:4), which some have associated with the elaborate cosmological theories associated with what came to be known as Gnosticism. Some are a little more pointed such as the reference to "Jewish myths or to commandments of those who reject the truth" (Tit 1:14). The latter is indicative of the growing division between people who believed in Jesus and more traditional Jews, a tension evident in other parts of the New Testament. At least one important Christian teaching seems to be disputed within the community of believers. 2 Timothy complains about the teaching of two individual otherwise unknown, Hymenaeus and Philetus, who claimed that "the resurrection has already taken place" (2 Tim 2:18). Exactly what they have in mind is debated. It may be the

kind of issue that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 15, where he insists on the reality of a future bodily resurrection, though in a transformed state. Or it may reflect interpretations of resurrection language that refer to the new life that believers now have in Christ, the kind of affirmation found, e.g., in John 11:25, but also in Pauline texts (Rom 5:4; Col 2:13). On a more practical level, the author of 1 Timothy takes issue with teachers who have a more rigorous, ascetical approach to their faith, who "forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving" (1 Tim 4:3) and he does kindly recommend that Timothy "take a little wine for the sake of your stomach."

Order, Ecclesial and Societal

A major concern of the pastorals is with the leadership of the community of faith, at a time when ecclesiastic structures were still in formation. 1 Timothy highlights the role of "overseers" or "bishops" (1 Tim 3:1–7) and deacons (1 Tim 3:8–13). An interesting admonition for the emergence of women in modern leadership roles is the reference to "women" in connection with deacons (1 Tim 3:11). The verse probably refers to women serving in this capacity, although traditional interpretation read this as a reference to the wives of male deacons mentioned just before the verse. All these leaders have to behave in a decent way and have a good reputation. The author also is concerned with "elders" or "presbyters" who preach and teach (1 Tim 5:17), who should receive payment for their work (1 Tim 5:18), and who need to be judged fairly when complaints are lodged against them (1 Tim 5:19). People in these roles must preach and teach with persistence (2 Tim 4:1–5) and must teach sound doctrine and exhibit high moral standards (Tit 2:1, 5). How these various leaders relate to one another at the time is not clear. The familiar hierarchical organization of traditional churches is probably a later development.

The author of the pastorals is also concerned with the behavior of members of the community in their ordinary social roles, particularly those in positions subordinate to the community's male leadership. In a set of admonitions paralleled in contemporary moral exhortations and known as "household codes" the author bids all to respect people of all ages, (1 Tim 5:1–2). Women who would be treated as widows, and receive community support, must meet rigid criteria (1 Tim 5:3–16). The most problematic passage for the history of the Pastorals

is the concluding detailed admonition to slaves to obey their masters, particularly when their masters are believers (1 Tim 6:1–2), an admonition paralleled in other "household codes."

The "mystery of the faith"

The phrase "the mystery of (the) faith," which occurs at 1 Tim. 3:9, has become one of the most famous phrases in the minor epistles, and its meaning has evolved through Christian history. In Greek culture, a *mystērion* was a religious cult into which a person had to be initiated before they were allowed to witness or take part in the rituals. One reason for calling Christianity a mystery may therefore have been that, according to Christians, it could only be truly understood from the inside. The term could also be used more generally of something that had to be revealed by God or a god before human beings could grasp it. In the Synoptic gospels Jesus speaks of "the mysteries of the kingdom of God/heaven," which are revealed to the disciples but not to other people (e.g., Matt 13:11). Paul describes himself as speaking God's wisdom "in a mystery": wisdom which had been hidden until God revealed it to him through the Spirit (1 Cor 2:7, 10). But Paul can also speak of the end time as a mystery which has not yet been revealed to the faithful (1 Cor 15:51), and this sense – that there are things in our faith that are still a mystery to us and will be until the end time – may be the most familiar to Christians today. In 1 Timothy, the "mystery of (the) faith," together with the phrase "the mystery of piety" which occurs at 3:16, probably refers to the teaching which Christians received, which they only understand after baptism, and perhaps continue to explore for the rest of their lives.