

Chapter One

SETTING THE STAGE

aus: N.T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, London 2015.

1. Introduction

If Paul had never been heard of, and his letters had suddenly come to light in a hoard of papyri long buried in the sands of Egypt, there are certain questions we would want to ask about them. Who was the author? Did the same person write all these letters, or only some? In what culture did the author(s) live, and how might that culture help us understand what was being said? When were they written? Were they real letters, or was the literary form simply adopted as a teaching tool? Supposing them to be real letters, who were they addressed to? How would they have been understood? Can we get a sense, from the letters, of the larger world in which the author and the readers lived? What human motivations can we discern both in the letters themselves and in their circumstances, so far as we can reconstruct them? Historians ask questions like these all the time. Any academic study of Paul, a letter-writer from two thousand years ago, must be grounded in the attempt to answer such questions with all the tools available to us. The aim, all along, is 'exegesis': to get *out* of the text what is there, rather than, as with 'eisegesis', to put into it ideas from somewhere else.

We engage in this historical task neither out of mere antiquarian curiosity nor out of nostalgia for a long-forgotten past. We do it because we crave genuine understanding, a real meeting of minds and even of worlds. As soon as we think about it, we know we should do our best, in reading any texts from other contexts, to avoid two dangers: anachronism, imagining that people in a former *time* saw the world the way we do, and what Coleridge called 'anatotism', imagining that people in a different *place* saw things the way we do.¹ Of course, we are at liberty to read the texts how we like – just as, notoriously, the guardians of ancient scrolls and manuscripts have sometimes been known to use them for shoe-leather, or for lighting the fire. But we know instinctively, I think, the difference between use and abuse. History is about what happened, and why it happened. We do not advance that quest by projecting our own personalities, or cultural assumptions, on to material from other times and places.

Of course, we see things through our own eyes, and imagine them within our own worlds of understanding. But history is about learning to let the

¹ Coleridge 1836, 1.317: librarians who arrange books by geographical subject-matter 'must commit an anachronism in order to avoid an anatopism'.