

Wrestling with Paul: 2 Peter 3:15-16, Early Textual Manipulation, and Contemporary Hermeneutical Implications

Olagoke Bolaji, PhD

Lecturer, The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho, Oyo State, Nigeria

Received: 22 June 2026 | Accepted: 05 September 2026 | Published: 24 September 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22943333>

Abstract

This paper examines 2 Peter 3:15–16 as a significant witness to the early reception, interpretation, and textual transmission of Paul’s letters within emerging Christianity. The passage is noteworthy for its description of Paul as a “beloved brother,” its recognition that his letters contained matters that were “hard to understand,” and its warning that the ignorant and unstable were distorting them, as they did “the other scriptures.” These statements suggest that Paul’s writings were already circulating as a recognisable body of literature, were regarded as authoritative, and were subject to competing interpretations. The study, therefore, explores the relationship between Pauline reception history and the broader history of textual transmission in early Christianity. It surveys the ways Paul was interpreted and contested by early Christian communities and considers the phenomenon of intentional and unintentional scribal alterations that affected the transmission of biblical texts. Particular attention is given to the authorship and date of 2 Peter, the literary and theological significance of 3:15–16, and the meaning of its reference to Paul’s letters alongside “the other scriptures.” The paper argues that 2 Peter 3:15–16 provides an important early testimony to both the developing authority of Pauline writings and the challenges associated with their interpretation and transmission. It concludes that the passage offers contemporary readers a theological model of interpretive humility, textual attentiveness, and responsible engagement with difficult biblical texts, while warning against manipulating Scripture to support predetermined interpretations.

Keywords: Wrestling with Paul, 2 Peter 3:15-16, Early Textual Manipulation, and Contemporary Hermeneutical Implications

Introduction

Tucked into the closing exhortation of 2 Peter is a remarkable, almost off-hand admission: the letters of “our beloved brother Paul” contain things “hard to understand,” which “the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures” (2 Peter 3:15-16). In these two verses, the author accomplishes several things at once. He claims Paul as a fellow apostolic authority, acknowledges that Paul’s letters were already circulating as a body of literature open to competing interpretation, concedes that some of that literature resists easy comprehension, and implicitly places Paul’s writings on a level with “the other scriptures,” language that anticipates,

however loosely, the later Christian canon.¹ This single passage, therefore, functions as a hinge between two major areas of New Testament scholarship: the reception and interpretation of Paul in earliest Christianity, and the textual history of the documents through which Paul has been transmitted to later readers, including textual interventions sometimes motivated by interpretive disputes.

This paper takes 2 Peter 3:15-16 as an interpretive test case for examining both concerns together. It begins by surveying how Paul was read and contested by his earliest interpreters, since 2 Peter's testimony that Paul's letters were already being "twisted" presupposes a lively and disputed reception history. It then turns to the broader phenomenon of early textual manipulation of biblical documents, situating 2 Peter's warning within the now well-documented history of intentional and unintentional scribal alteration. It proceeds to a close exegesis of 2 Peter 3:15-16 itself, examining its authorship, date, and precise claims about Paul and "the other scriptures." Finally, it draws out the hermeneutical implications of this passage for contemporary readers of Paul, arguing that 2 Peter offers both an ancient warrant for interpretive humility and an ancient warning against interpretive license.

Paul and His Readers and Interpreters

Paul's letters were, from the moment of their composition, occasional documents addressed to specific communities and specific crises; their transformation into a portable, cross-referenced corpus available for citation, allusion, and dispute, the very state of affairs 2 Peter 3:15-16 presupposes, was neither instantaneous nor uncontested. David Trobisch's study of the formation of the Pauline letter collection argues that an edited collection of Paul's major letters existed already within a generation or two of Paul's death, complete with editorial features (a fixed sequence, a system of prescripts) that indicate deliberate compilation rather than haphazard accumulation². Harry Gamble's complementary study of book production in the early church situates this process within the broader material culture of early Christian textuality, noting that the codex format, adopted unusually early and consistently by Christian communities, facilitated precisely the kind of cross-letter reference and collection that a passage like 2 Peter 3:15-16 assumes its readers can make.³

The existence of a circulating Pauline corpus, however, did not produce interpretive consensus. If anything, it multiplied the occasions for dispute. Benjamin White's study of the "remembered Paul" in second-century Christianity demonstrates that Paul quickly became a contested figure whose image was actively shaped, and reshaped, by competing groups each claiming him as their own authority, Marcionite Christians who read Paul as the sole authentic apostle standing against a corrupted Jewish-Christian tradition; proto-orthodox writers who claimed Paul while working to integrate him with the rest of the apostolic witness; and various other groups, including some later labeled "Gnostic," who found in Paul's more esoteric language warrant for

¹ T Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter: Word Biblical Commentary 50* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 325-333.

² David Trobisch, *Paul's Letter Collection: Tracing the Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 12-21.

³ Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 58-66.

their own theological systems.⁴ White's central argument, that there was no single, stable "remembered Paul" in the second century but rather several competing Pauls constructed by "reputational entrepreneurs" for their own theological and communal purposes, gives historical substance to 2 Peter's complaint that the "ignorant and unstable" were already twisting Paul's letters.

This contested reception was, in significant part, a function of Paul's own rhetorical and theological difficulty. Paula Fredriksen's account of Paul's apocalyptic thought-world emphasises how thoroughly Paul's argumentation depends on convictions, an imminent *parousia*, a cosmic drama involving principalities and powers, a paradoxical theology of the cross, that were not self-evident even to Paul's contemporaries and that became progressively more difficult to inhabit as the expected end of the age receded into an increasingly distant future.⁵ A letter corpus written to address concrete first-century crises, saturated with apocalyptic urgency and dense argumentation, was always going to generate the kind of interpretive difficulty 2Peter names; the surprise is not that Paul was found "hard to understand" but that any early Christian community expected otherwise.

The specific content of these early misreadings, so far as it can be reconstructed, clustered around several recurring flashpoints: Paul's statements on the imminence of the end (2 Thessalonians 2 already appears to correct an over-realised reading of Pauline eschatology, itself perhaps evidence of early Pauline reception gone awry); his teaching on grace and freedom from the law, which some evidently took as license for moral indifference, provoking the corrective concern voiced in Romans 6:1; and his more cosmologically dense passages in Colossians and Ephesians, which later gnosticising readers mined for support of dualistic and esoteric theological systems. Each of these flashpoints illustrates the same basic dynamic that 2Peter names in miniature: a genuinely difficult body of literature, read by communities under theological and social pressure, generating readings that its author might well not have anticipated or endorsed.

It is against this backdrop of genuine, historically documented interpretive contest, not merely a rhetorical flourish, that 2 Peter's brief but pointed comment about Paul's letters must be read. The author is not inventing a problem; he is naming one already well underway, and doing so, notably, from a position that claims apostolic kinship with Paul ("our beloved brother") rather than rivalry or repudiation.

Early Manipulation of Biblical Texts

The interpretive contests surveyed above did not remain confined to sermons, commentaries, and theological treatises; they left traces directly in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament itself. The discipline of New Testament textual criticism has, over the past several decades, moved decisively away from treating scribal variation as merely accidental noise to be filtered out in the search for an "original text," and toward treating at least some variants as meaningful historical evidence of the theological and social pressures under which scribes worked. Bart Ehrman's influential study of what he terms "the orthodox corruption of Scripture" catalogues numerous instances in which scribes, in the course of copying New Testament manuscripts during the second

⁴ Benjamin L. White, *Remembering Paul: Ancient and Modern Contests over the Image of the Apostle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16-18.

⁵ Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 1-7.

and third centuries, introduced small but theologically significant changes to the text in order to guard against, or provide support against, competing christological claims, such as adoptionist, separationist, docetic, and patripassianist readings among them.⁶ Ehrman's methodologically more cautious claim, that such changes, though individually modest, are collectively substantial and theologically motivated, has become a standard reference point in the field, even among scholars who resist his more popularising claims about the unreliability of the New Testament text as a whole.

The standard technical account of how such changes occurred, and how they can be identified and, where possible, reversed, remains the discipline's foundational manual, first authored by Bruce Metzger and later revised in collaboration with Ehrman. Metzger and Ehrman catalogue the primary mechanisms of both unintentional and intentional scribal alteration: unintentional errors arising from faulty eyesight, hearing, memory, or judgment (*haplography*, *dittography*, *homoioleuton*); and intentional alterations arising from a scribe's effort to correct perceived grammatical, historical, or doctrinal problems in the text before him, to harmonise parallel passages, or to conform a text to liturgical or doctrinal expectation.⁷ Their catalogue provides the technical vocabulary, and, crucially, the evidentiary caution, within which more sweeping claims about "corruption" must be assessed.

Ehrman's more popular treatment of this material argues, in stronger and more provocative terms, that the sheer number of variants across the New Testament manuscript tradition, by his estimate exceeding the total number of words in the New Testament itself, means that certainty about the precise original wording of many passages is permanently out of reach, and that some variants demonstrably altered the theological meaning of a text in ways later readers absorbed as original.⁸ This claim has generated considerable scholarly and popular controversy, not least because the overwhelming majority of textual variants are trivial (spelling, word order) and do not affect meaning, and because the surviving manuscript tradition of the New Testament is, by the standards of ancient literature generally, extraordinarily rich and early, allowing textual critics unusually good tools for identifying and correcting the more significant alterations. Nevertheless, even Ehrman's critics generally concede his more modest, technical point: that some scribes, in some places, altered the text of the Scripture for identifiable theological reasons, and that this alteration is itself a valuable historical witness to the doctrinal disputes of the second and third centuries.

David Parker's study of the textual history of the Gospels extends this insight methodologically, arguing that the New Testament text should be conceived not as a single fixed original later corrupted by careless or malicious scribes, but as a "living text" that continued to develop through a process of ongoing, communally embedded transmission, in which scribes

⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3-32.

⁷ Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 250-271.

⁸ Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005), 88-90.

functioned at times as active interpreters and even co-authors of the tradition they copied.⁹ This reframing does not deny that polemical or doctrinal motives drove some changes, Ehrman's central evidentiary claim. However, it cautions against treating every act of scribal alteration as a discrete, identifiable "corruption" of a once-pure text, since textual transmission in antiquity was, for both biblical and non-biblical literature, an inherently fluid and participatory process.

It is within this broader landscape of textual fluidity and theologically motivated alteration that the Pauline corpus, specifically, and 2 Peter's testimony about it, must be situated. The Pauline letters were subject to the same scribal pressures as the rest of the New Testament, harmonising alterations between parallel passages in different letters, theologically motivated adjustments to controversial statements about the law, grace, and the status of women, and, in at least one well-documented instance, wholesale redaction by the second-century figure Marcion, who produced an edited edition of ten Pauline letters purged of material he judged incompatible with his theology.¹⁰ Marcion's edition stands as the most dramatic documented case of a reader not merely misinterpreting Paul, in 2Peter's terms, but materially altering the text of Paul's letters to enforce that interpretation, precisely the convergence of hermeneutical dispute and textual manipulation that this paper takes as its subject.

Exegesis of 2 Peter 3:15-16

A responsible exegesis of 2 Peter 3:15-16 must begin with the question of the letter's authorship and date, since these bear directly on how the passage's testimony about Paul should be weighted historically. The overwhelming majority of critical scholars regard 2 Peter as pseudonymous, written in Peter's name by a later author, probably in the early second century, making it the latest-written document in the New Testament canon. Richard Bauckham's commentary, still the most thorough critical treatment of the letter, situates 2Peter within the ancient genre of the testamentary letter, a farewell discourse placed in the mouth of a revered founding figure as a vehicle for addressing the concerns of a later generation, and argues that this generic identification, rather than being a mark of deception, reflects a recognised and accepted literary convention of the period.¹¹ Jerome Neyrey's Anchor Bible commentary reaches a similar conclusion via social-scientific analysis, situating the letter's polemic against "scoffers" who deny the *parousia* (2 Peter 3:3-4) within the social dynamics of a community negotiating the delay of an expected eschatological event a generation or more after the deaths of the apostles themselves.¹²

This dating matters directly for interpreting verse 15's reference to Paul's letters. If 2 Peter is a document of the early second century, its author is writing at a temporal remove from Paul comparable to that separating a contemporary scholar from a late-nineteenth-century figure, close enough to inherit a real body of Pauline correspondence and real controversies over its

⁹ D David C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 203-213.

¹⁰ The Marcionite redaction of the Pauline corpus, though known to us only through the polemical reports of orthodox opponents such as Tertullian, is treated as a significant and largely reconstructible witness to second-century engagement with Paul's text in Trobisch, *Paul's Letter Collection*, and in White, *Remembering Paul*, Chapter 2.

¹¹ Bauckham, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 158-162.

¹² Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter and Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, *Anchor Bible 37C* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 122-128.

interpretation, but distant enough that the author addresses Paul as an already authoritative, already somewhat opaque figure of the recent past rather than as a living contemporary. Peter Davids' commentary emphasises that the passage's casual reference to "all his letters" (*en pasais epistolais*) implies that a reasonably complete Pauline collection, comparable to the corpus reconstructed by Trobisch and Gamble, was already available to the author and, presumably, to at least some portion of his audience.¹³

The theological content of the passage repays close attention to three points. First, the author explicitly aligns his own eschatological teaching with Paul's: "our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him" (3:15), a formula that attributes Paul's insight to divinely granted "wisdom" (*sophia*) rather than to independent human cleverness, thereby placing Paul's authority on a properly apostolic and even quasi-prophetic footing. Gene Green's commentary notes that this language of "wisdom given" closely echoes contemporary Jewish and early Christian descriptions of prophetic and scribal inspiration, reinforcing the passage's implicit claim that Paul wrote under divine guidance comparable to that attributed to the Hebrew prophets.¹⁴

Second, the author concedes, without apparent embarrassment, that Paul's letters contain material "hard to understand" (*dysnoeta tina*), a Greek term used elsewhere in antiquity for notoriously obscure oracular or philosophical texts. This concession functions rhetorically as an acknowledgment that the difficulty of interpretation is not, in itself, evidence against a text's authority or inspiration; hard texts can still be Scripture. Bauckham notes that this concession also implicitly defends Paul against the charge, evidently circulating in some quarters, that his teaching on grace and the law was itself heretical or dangerous: the problem, on 2 Peter's diagnosis, lies not in Paul's teaching but in the interpretive incompetence and instability of certain readers.¹⁵

Third, and most significant for the argument of this paper, the author states that "the ignorant and unstable twist [*streblōsousin*] them to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures" (3:16). The verb *streblōō* carries the connotation of forcible distortion, torture, or wrenching out of shape, a considerably stronger image than simple misreading. Neyrey argues that this verb, combined with the letter's broader polemic against "scoffers" who reject the promised *parousia*, indicates that the specific misreading in view is an antinomian or over-realised eschatological interpretation of Pauline grace theology, one that used Paul's own language of freedom from the law to justify moral license and to deny future judgment, precisely the misreading Paul himself anticipates and rejects in Romans 6:1-2.¹⁶ The equation of Paul's letters with "the other Scriptures" (*tas loipas graphas*) as objects of the same kind of destructive distortion is the passage's most theologically loaded move, since it implies a functional, if not yet formally canonical, scriptural status for Paul's letters within a generation or two of their composition, a striking early data point in the history of New Testament canon formation.

¹³ Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude: Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 305-310.

¹⁴ Gene L. Green, *Jude and 2 Peter: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 341-345.

¹⁵ Bauckham, *Jude-2 Peter*, 333-335.

¹⁶ Neyrey, *2 Peter--Jude*, 244-247.

Hermeneutical Implications of 2 Peter 3:15-16 for Contemporary

Interpreters of Paul

The exegetical findings of the preceding section yield several implications for how contemporary readers, scholarly and lay alike, might approach interpreting Paul today. The first and most basic implication is a warrant for interpretive humility: if the earliest datable external witness to Paul's letters already concedes that they contain material "hard to understand," contemporary readers who find Paul's argumentation dense, allusive, or resistant to easy paraphrase are in good, and very early, company. This should discourage two equally unhelpful postures among contemporary interpreters, an overconfident certainty that any given reading of a contested Pauline passage is self-evidently correct, and a dismissive skepticism that treats Paul's difficulty as evidence of incoherence rather than of genuine theological and rhetorical density.

The second implication concerns the relationship between interpretation and consequence. 2 Peter's language of "twisting" Paul's letters "to their own destruction" insists that hermeneutics is not a merely academic exercise but carries real stakes for the interpreting community, a claim with obvious resonance for contemporary debates in which Pauline texts continue to be invoked, on various sides, in disputes over ethics, gender, and social order. The passage does not license contemporary interpreters to declare their opponents "ignorant and unstable" whenever they disagree. However, it does insist, against a purely relativistic hermeneutics in which all readings are equally defensible, that some readings of Paul genuinely distort his intended meaning and that such distortion has consequences.

The third implication concerns the significance of textual manipulation itself for contemporary interpreters, as discussed in Section III above. If the Pauline corpus, like the rest of the New Testament, bears the marks of theologically motivated scribal intervention, harmonisations, doctrinal clarifications, and, in Marcion's case, outright redaction, then responsible contemporary interpretation of Paul cannot proceed as though the received text were a theologically neutral given, immune from the very kind of interpretive contest 2 Peter describes. Ehrman's and Parker's work, read alongside Bauckham's, Neyrey's, Davids,' and Green's careful exegesis of 2 Peter itself, together suggest that textual criticism and hermeneutics are not separate disciplines but two aspects of a single, ongoing task: recovering, so far as the evidence allows, both what Paul most plausibly wrote and what he most plausibly meant, against the pressure of readers in every generation, ancient and modern, who have wished he had written or meant something more convenient to their own commitments.

A fourth and more constructive implication follows from White's account of the "remembered Paul." If Paul has always been a contested figure, actively constructed and reconstructed by interpreters serving their own theological and communal purposes, then contemporary interpreters do well to examine their own interpretive commitments with the same critical scrutiny they apply to ancient "heretical" misreadings. The line 2 Peter draws between faithful and "twisted" interpretation of Paul is real and important, but it is not a line contemporary readers can draw simply by aligning themselves rhetorically with "Peter" against some named or unnamed opponent; it requires the same careful, historically and textually grounded exegetical labor that Bauckham, Neyrey, Davids, and green model in their treatment of the passage itself.

Finally, 2 Peter 3:15-16 offers contemporary interpreters a model of collegial, rather than combative, correction within the apostolic tradition. The author does not denounce Paul, relativise his authority, or attempt to silence his letters in response to their misuse; he defends Paul as a “beloved brother” writing with divinely given wisdom, while simultaneously warning against the specific misreadings his letters had already attracted. This combination, a robust affirmation of a difficult author’s authority together with vigilant care for how that author is read, remains a durable model for contemporary theological engagement with Paul, whatever specific interpretive disputes any given generation of readers happens to have.

Conclusion

2 Peter 3:15-16 is a brief passage, but it opens onto two of the largest questions in New Testament scholarship: how Paul was read, and misread, by the earliest communities that received his letters, and how the very text of those letters was shaped, and at times reshaped, by the theological pressures of transmission. The passage’s testimony that Paul’s letters were already being “twisted” finds ample confirmation in the documented reception history surveyed by Trobisch, Gamble, and White, and its implicit elevation of Paul’s letters to the status of “scripture” anticipates a textual history, traced by Ehrman, Metzger, and Parker, in which that very scriptural status made the Pauline corpus a site of ongoing scribal intervention. For contemporary interpreters, the passage offers neither a naive confidence that Paul is easily understood nor a license to dismiss him as impossibly obscure, but a call to the same patient, historically informed, and humbly self-critical exegesis that this paper has attempted to model in miniature.

Copyright © 2026, Authors retain copyright. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> (CC BY 4.0 deed)

References

- Bauckham, Richard J. *Jude & 2 Peter: Word Biblical Commentary 50*. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983.
- Davids, Peter H. *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.
- Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.
- Ehrman, Bart D. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

- Fredriksen, Paula. *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.
- Gamble, Harry Y. *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Green, Gene L. *Jude and 2 Peter: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.
- Metzger, Bruce M., and Bart D. Ehrman. *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Neyrey, Jerome H. *2 Peter, Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. Anchor Bible 37C*. New York: Doubleday, 1993.
- Parker, David C. *The Living Text of the Gospels*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Trobisch, David. *Paul's Letter Collection: Tracing the Origins*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.
- White, Benjamin L. *Remembering Paul: Ancient and Modern Contests Over the Image of the Apostle*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.