Stylometrics and the Question of Interpolation in Paul

Opening Remarks

In any tradition, there are two ways of approaching the texts which are central to that tradition. Following Arthur Waley, I will call them the scriptural and the historical. The scriptural approach puts the texts themselves beyond question, accepts them as a given, and develops their meaning for modern persons. The historical approach asks what happened to bring about the situation in which these texts exist, and came to be included in the canon of that tradition. Scriptural study expects consistency and uniformity in the final result; historical study expects to find development. The two have different aims and use different methods. It might be expected that a mixture of both approaches would sooner or later reach stalemate, with the findings of the scripturals insufficient for the historicals, and the findings of the historicals offensive to the scripturals. This has in fact occurred.

Given that the rise and spread of Christianity, whether one is inside it or out of it, is a world event of some importance, it might be useful to separate the historical component of that conversation out from the other one, and leave it free to proceed on its own. Those following that approach may disagree over whether the text evidence justifies identifying a given passage as interpolated. For some points of interest there is simply no evidence, and for others, people with the same presumptions (that is, those who admit the possibility of interpolations in texts) may simply not agree. That final result is not a stalemate due to divergent first presumptions, it is simply a sign that the passage in question is a hard one. Discussions like the present one may not issue in instant agreement on all points. The hope is that they may issue in agreement on at least a few of the easier points, and thus produce a shared picture in which the right approach to the harder points may be easier to find.

It is inevitably urged against any finding of the historical approach that it is subjective. What is an egregious interruption for one is a charming intentional digression for another. We hope today to introduce a new tool which, whatever its usefulness, is at least an objective fact about a text – the degree to which its usage of common connectives and other functional words departs from the norm of Biblical Greek at large. This is nothing new; more than one commentary has noted an unusual incidence of δϵ in some Pauline text. If that tool proves useful, and that will be a matter for the judgement of those who have tested it on particular situations, then the zone of subjectivity will have been, to that extent, reduced, and the chance of success proportionately increased.

Our topic today is the Pauline texts, with special emphasis on post-Pauline events: what Paul's editors may have done in editing his genuine epistles for wider circulation, and what they and others may have had in mind in writing wholly new texts under Paul's name. How far that gets will not be known until meeting's end, and I thus turn to the meeting's beginning, and to our presentation of how our proposed style test works in practice. We begin with material on which our Project has long experience, namely, the equally controverted classical Chinese texts. That presentation will be made by Project assistant Mary Cleary.