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Interpolations in Paul: A Rejoinder to William O. Walker Jr.

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ABSTRACT

This project seeks to evaluate and critique the work of William O. Walker Jr., retired Jennie Farris Railey King Professor Emeritus of Religion at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas and member of the Westar Institute. His work on the nature of interpolations in the letters of the apostle Paul stirred controversy in biblical studies upon the publication of his 2001 monograph *Interpolations in the Pauline Letters*. This text sought to reanalyse the character of material that had been inserted into Paul's letters and the criteria by which such elements may be identified. Many found his work to be a vital herald to reinvigorate Pauline studies with insights from classical literature, whilst others were concerned about his presentation of the probability of interpolations and the potential ramifications it would have for the future study of Paul. I have found that his erudite work has been somewhat neglected over the last few decades, with very few recent commentators providing Walker the citations he deserves after so many years in the field.

My project is to subject Walker's work to the scrutiny it should have received upon its initial release. I intend to defend Walker from some of the less sophisticated responses to his work that tend to gloss over his positions or incredulously dismiss them outright. There is little that can be gained by ignoring such an important work on a massively neglected subject. Whilst I am impressed by his clarity and the intensity of his research on this underrepresented topic, I believe there are areas of his proposals that occasionally suffer from faulty argumentation, illogical conclusions, and a lack of balance in presenting how the phenomenon of interpolation is viewed in the scholarship. I will offer critiques of his approach and potential solutions.

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Introduction

In 2001, William O. Walker Jr. provided us with an important study on the nature of interpolations in the epistles of Paul, arguing that the apostle's letters are heavily permeated with later scribal additions. Walker outlined the need for an improved set of criteria to identify these interpolations, proposing a rigorous methodology to isolate and examine verses, passages, and entire chapters of Paul's letters that he viewed as secondary alterations. Here, I will endeavour to analyse Walker's work and offer some suggestions where I think his proposals are weakest.

1. Background Evidence

1.1 - Walker's Definition of Interpolations

An appropriate starting point for our study would be to first look at how interpolations are designated and distinguished from similar literary phenomena.¹ The Soulen's *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* classifies interpolations as "material inserted into the text in the process of scribal transmission, thereby altering the original reading."² Walker similarly suggests that interpolations are "foreign material inserted deliberately and directly into the text of a document."³ Additionally, E. Randolph Richards articulates another, less limiting, definition: "a phrase, sentence or even a paragraph that has been inserted by someone else into Paul's letter."⁴ Outside biblical studies, similar definitions arise. Discussing interpolations in Thucydides, Karl Maurer defines

¹ See Stanley E. Porter *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation* (London/New York: Routledge, 2007) and Joel Green's *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2013) as examples of works lacking definitions for interpolations. This paucity in the reference material concerning what interpolations even are merits further expansion of the study of the phenomena.

² Richard N. Soulen and P. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 2002), p. 86.

³ William O. Walker Jr., *Interpolations in the Pauline Letters*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 213 (New York/London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) p. 22; this definition is preferred in David E. Aune, *The Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p. 232.

⁴ E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition, and Collection* (Downer's Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 99.

such material as “the insertion (whether deliberate or not) into the text of entire words, phrases and larger units.”⁵

Under Walker’s definition, the material suspected of being inserted is inferred to be “other” than that which could be reasonably expected to originate with Paul. This is a component that Richards intentionally excludes from his definition as to incorporate material that may have been inserted by Paul himself prior to a letter’s dispatch, arguing that an interpolation is not necessarily alien to the original author’s literary proclivities. Walker agrees with Richards in so far that “the writer and the interpolator may or may not be the same person,”⁶ but notably chooses to opt this factor out of his definition.⁷ Moreover, Walker goes so far as to exclude material composed by one of Paul’s associates that was then inserted by Paul himself.⁸ We can thus define Walker’s classification as the following: *material that was discretely added by someone other than Paul into one of his letters after it was completed and dispatched—likely without his authorisation—and is therefore unlikely to be directly traced back to the apostle.*

1.2 – Differentiating from Other Literary Phenomena

Walker’s definition of interpolations emphasises their deliberative nature⁹ and presents us with an intentionally “restricted” categorisation. This contrasts with Maurer’s broad categorisation of interpolations: it includes everything from accidental glosses to the deliberate insertion of simple reading aids.¹⁰

It is vital to recognise this disagreement in defining interpolations. Karl Olav Sandnes contends that

⁵ Karl Maurer, *Interpolations in Thucydides* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), p. xii.

⁶ William O. Walker Jr., “The Burden of Proof in Identifying Interpolations in the Pauline Letters,” *New Testament Studies* 33/4 (1987): p. 616.

⁷ William O. Walker Jr., “Interpolations in the Pauline Letters” in *The Pauline Canon*, ed. Stanley Porter, *Pauline Studies* vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 196–97.

⁸ William O. Walker Jr., “Text–Critical Evidence for Interpolations in the Letters of Paul,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50/4 (1988): p. 624, n. 22.

⁹ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 22; Walker, “Pauline Letters,” p. 195.

¹⁰ Maurer, *Interpolations*, pp. 2–5.

Walker's definition simplifies the matter. The very fact that scholars disagree so markedly in their conclusions – not only in this case, but in most similar cases – calls for some caution here.¹¹

In discussing the same phenomenon in the same type of ancient literature, Walker, Richards, and Maurer fail to find much common ground. This remarkable disparity in scholar's terminology when it comes to identifying non–Pauline insertions demands that Sandnes' call for caution does not go unheeded.

Despite being somewhat parochial, Walker's definition is to be preferred for the moment. His version emphasises the nature of interpolations as not being composed by the original author, which tends to conform to what is expected in association with the term. By all accounts, Paul could have “interpolated” material into his letters prior to their dispatch, as Richards emphatically reminds his readers.¹² Nevertheless Walker's definition conforms to what is colloquially understood as interpolated material; his definition excludes Paul as the interpolator and instead focuses on unauthorised insertions.¹³ As we shall see, however, there are several problems that stem from Walker's work that could be resolved if he adopted a less limiting definition.

1.3 – Walker's View of the Background Evidence

Walker's most significant (and controversial) contribution to this discussion is his view of the background evidence for interpolations. In his work, he lamented the neglect of the prior probability for potential insertions in previous works.¹⁴ Walker proposes the following suggestion to remedy this vacancy:

In the treatment of any particular passage in the Pauline letters, the burden of proof rests with the argument that the passage is an interpolation; in dealing with the letters as a corpus, however, or, indeed, in dealing with any particular letter in the corpus, the burden of proof rests with any argument that the corpus or, indeed, any

¹¹ Karl Olav Sandnes, *Paul Perceived: An Interactionist Perspective on Paul and the Law* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), p. 119.

¹² Richards, *Letter Writing*, pp. 118–20.

¹³ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 24.

¹⁴ Walker, “Pauline Letters,” p. 195.

particular letter within the corpus (with the possible exception of Philemon) contains no interpolations.¹⁵

Walker's inherent suspicions of Pauline interpolations are born out of literary-critical considerations; that there are plenty of interpolations in other ancient literature from Classical and Hellenistic to Jewish and Christian writings.¹⁶ Such a pervasive scribal habit makes it likely that Paul's letters would have been subject to the same process. There was, as Sandnes puts it, "a practice of expanding upon Paul's letters."¹⁷ The letters of Paul, according to Walker, are therefore fluid from the start and contain both Pauline reminiscences and the signatures of later copyists. Ultimately, Walker attempts to alleviate the burden of proof for the interpolation theorist. Typically, a passage in an authentic Pauline letter is regarded as Pauline unless there are convincing arguments to the contrary. According to Walker, we can—and should—*a priori* assume that there are interpolations in Paul's letters.¹⁸

As an initial assessment, Walker's plea for more attention to the background evidence is not unreasonable. Without earlier manuscripts to compare, there will always be a level of ambiguity regarding the state of the original autograph. Given the pervasiveness of alterations in the New Testament (e.g., John 7:53–8:11, 1 John 5:7),¹⁹ there is no reason to think that Paul's letters would be any different. Indeed, Paul is a *better* candidate for interpolation than other New Testament writers, with the anonymous copyist likely hoping to appropriate Paul's authority to provide credence to whichever viewpoint they put forward in their interpolation, be it ecclesiastical politics or theological doctrine. Thus, there appear to be good reasons to be inherently predisposed towards seeing interpolations in Paul's letters.

¹⁵ Walker, "Burden of Proof", p. 611.

¹⁶ Walker, *Interpolations*, 27–36; Walker, 'Burden of Proof', pp. 611–12; see Walker's citations including George M. Bolling, *The External Evidence for Interpolation in Homer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925).

¹⁷ Sandnes, *Paul Perceived*, p. 118.

¹⁸ Walker finds support for this view in scholars such as Khiok-Khng Yeo, *Rhetorical Interaction in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10*, Biblical Interpretation Series Vol. 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 79–80; Brook W. R. Pearson, *Corresponding Sense: Paul, Dialectic, and Gadamer* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 155–56; George J. Brooke, "2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 Again: A Change in Perspective," in Jean-Sebastian Rey (ed.) *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Pauline Literature*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah Vol. 102 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014), p. 6.

¹⁹ For discussion of these notorious and universally accepted interpolations, see Chris Keith, *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus*, New Testament Tools, Studies, and Documents Vol. 38 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008), pp. 119–39 and Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), p. 293 respectively.

1.4 - Responses to Walker

The reception of Walker's controversial methodology has been mixed. Against Walker, Horrell affirms that "It is questionable, though, whether such an approach is legitimate in instances where there is no textual evidence to support the case for interpolation."²⁰ Horrell additionally warns against those like Walker who "enthusiastically excise portions of the Pauline letters and thus offer a reconstructed (more radical) Paul."²¹ Horrell's observation is notable considering Walker's political incentives, who discloses in the introduction of his book that he was motivated to argue for the inauthenticity of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 because of his concerns for gender equality in modern pastoral ministry.²² Fatima Tofghi picks up on this apparent bias in Walker's methodology, noting that he "seems to have been involved in an agenda of acquitting Paul from the charges of misogyny" and that "even if Walker's claims were accepted, there would not be a huge change in biblical interpretation."²³ This does not necessarily diminish the quality of Walker's argumentation, but there is a risk that personal inclinations could be used to buttress arguments against passages that are deemed unfit for the apostle.

This in mind, other scholars have also not taken kindly to the radical uncertainty that may arise regarding the text of the epistles if Walker's methodology would be accepted. Murphy–O'Connor exclaims his worries vehemently:

if everything is presumed to be quicksand, how can one even begin to look for solid ground? Who would venture out into the morass? It would make scholarship impossible. If we are to believe Walker... no exegete could ever cite a parallel from Strabo or Quintillian without doing an analysis of their works that would take a lifetime.²⁴

²⁰ David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 185.

²¹ Horrell, *Social Ethos*, pp. 185–86.

²² Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 7.

²³ Fatima Tofghi, "Unveiling the European Women" in Yvonne Sherwood (ed.), *The Bible and Feminism: Reshaping the Field* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 482.

²⁴ Jerome Murphy–O'Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians: Revisiting the Major Issues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 270.

While Murphy–O'Connor's counter appears to suffer from an appeal to incredulity, painting the situation as a postmodern gambit to obscure certainty and secure ambiguity in historical discussions, there is merit to his apprehensiveness over blanket statements in the entire Pauline Corpus prior to the assessment of evidence for individual occurrences. For Walker, the text is declared guilty until proven innocent. Such an approach almost guarantees that when one sets out find an interpolation—irrespective of the evidence—they will find one.²⁵

I have several observations of my own to make regarding Walker's proposal. Firstly, Walker fails to demonstrate that those who are unconvinced by interpolation theories are obliged to affirm a starting point where *no* interpolations exist in Paul's letters, as quoted above. There is disagreement as to, for example, the extent of the editing of Paul's letters,²⁶ with Murphy–O'Connor accusing Walker of quote-mining secondary sources for his view of Paul's letters as a hopelessly edited collection.²⁷ But those who advocate for genuineness are clearly not beholden to affirm that there are not any interpolations. Such would be a *non-sequitur* and suggests there are only two camps in this discussion (pro- or anti-interpolation) when there is always more nuance in these kinds of scholarly debates.

Secondly, Walker prefers to refer to an interpolation not as individual insertions but one among the collective interpolations that are likely to be found in Paul's letters.²⁸ If the advocate for textual authenticity concedes that there were *some* interpolations in Paul's letters (say, some of the more widely accepted ones such as Romans 8:1 or 1 Cor. 14:34–35). Doing so would free them from the burden of insisting that there were no interpolations. If two or three are accepted (as even by traditionalist scholars like Richards²⁹), this alleviates them from being coerced into accepting the "patterns" that Walker insists are present in the epistles. There is no necessitated number of interpolations associated with the acquiescence that they are present in Paul's letters. Moreover, the probability of secondary alteration does not increase exponentially as more probable interpolations are secured, as this would eradicate the original

²⁵ Hence the dozens of proposed interpolations Walker lists in *Interpolations*, pp. 16-20.

²⁶ As Walker notes in *Interpolations*, p. 39.

²⁷ Murphy–O'Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians*, p. 269

²⁸ Walker, *Interpolations*, 59; "Pauline Letters," p. 198.

²⁹ Richards, *Letter-Writing*, pp. 101-02.

document from existence. Walker's extrapolation does little to alleviate the overall burden of proof.

Take, for example, Murphy-O'Connor's analogy of the probability of a man getting inebriated based on whether he is accompanied by three particular friends. If this only occurred once or twice, there is no pattern and the principle cannot be allowed to establish itself.³⁰ It is therefore clear that, instead of placing inordinate weight on the background evidence, what determines the probability of whether there are interpolations is going to be dependent on other indicators, not the antecedent track record of interpolations.

1.5 - Conclusion Relative to the Background Evidence

Walker's *a-priori* methodology has not won favour with most academics; nor is the present writer totally convinced of his proposals. The application of his suggestions demands further qualification and some of his inductive conclusions do not logically follow. The dichotomy that is posited between assuming the widespread pervasiveness of interpolations and the assumption of zero interpolations is a demonstrably false one.

I believe it would be preferable to confidently entertain the possibility of an interpolation as opposed to the extreme of expecting and searching for one; the difference between the two being a preference for *passive acceptance* of the notion of interpolations versus the *active anticipation* of them. "Interpolations are *apriori* possible, but not in any given case probable"³¹ as Murphy-O'Connor observes.

2. Initial Indicators

With a comprehensive understanding of the background evidence in place, we now turn our attention to the "initial indicators"³² for identifying suspect passages. These are the primary headings that are to be used in assessing the authenticity of a passage. I will analyse their sufficiency in tandem with Walker's own definitions and

³⁰ See also the analogy given in Murphy-O'Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians*, p. 270.

³¹ Murphy-O'Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians*, p. 269.

³² Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 65.

assessments.³³ Here I hope to demonstrate that these methods are useful in principle but problematic in their application.

2.1 - Textual Evidence

When a passage is omitted from some manuscript copies, it may suggest that it was not part of the passage when it was originally written.³⁴ Walker lists two primary conditions in which a possible interpolation might be suggested by the state of the textual evidence: (1) the absence of a passage from one or more of the early witnesses, with consideration given as to the geographical distribution and genealogical relationship with text families (e.g., John 7:53–8:11),³⁵ (2) the appearance of a passage at different locations in a variety of witnesses (e.g., Rom 16:25–27).³⁶

These conditions are by no means perfect, however. Specifically *when* a particular witness becomes viable for an interpolation theory is difficult to determine, as even later textual witnesses can be useful in reconstructing original readings.³⁷ Additionally, the inference of an interpolation from the absence of a passage in a particular witness is not the only implication from the data. The passage could be genuine but was perhaps omitted by a copyist writing between the original and the copy that we have.³⁸

There are therefore inherent limits to the abilities of text–criticism to reconstruct the original reading of a document where an interpolation is suspected. Moreover, as Murphy–O’Connor says, condition (2) needs to “be assessed very carefully because

³³ Other criteria that Walker deals with (e.g., comparative, situational, motivational evidence) are omitted from this discussion both due to Walker’s own brevity, his own scepticism of their usefulness, and a lack of space.

³⁴ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 66.

³⁵ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 67; cf. Horrell, *Social Ethos*, p. 186.

³⁶ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 69. For further discussion of the doxology in Romans 16, see Harry Y. Gamble, *The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 16–29, 101–32; Richard N. Longnecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), pp. 1073–81.

³⁷ Some later readings of the Byzantine tradition are anticipated in early fragments like P46. See David C. Parker, ‘The Development of Textual Criticism Since B. H. Streeter’ *New Testament Studies* Vol. 24, No. 1 (1977), pp. 156.

³⁸ Walker, *Interpolations*, pp. 47–48, 50–55; cf. Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

of the interdependence of MSS.”³⁹ The relocation of a passage lends to the uncertainty of its authenticity but is not necessarily the most plausible explanation. Once more we see that deliberate and maliciously motivated interpolations are not the only conclusion that could be inferred from a misplaced passage in a fluid text. Still, these first two conditions provide us with our most promising indications that a document with an omission in the earliest witnesses may suggest that, at an early stage, the passage in question was not been a part of the document in which it now appears.

In his work, Walker makes a great deal about the sufficiency (or, rather, the insufficiency) of textual evidence to demonstrate (or discredit) an interpolation. It is often the recourse of counterarguments against interpolations that the absence of any textual variation in the suspected verse or passage is evidence that there was no interpolation, or evidence enough to greatly mitigate against such a suggestion.⁴⁰ Walker, however, argues that the lack of early manuscripts for Paul means that we cannot be certain of what happened to the autographs before our earliest copies. Instead, a “conjectural emendation” to restore the suggested form of the passage is preferred.⁴¹ Metzger and Ehrman’s classic discussion of conjectural emendations, however, outlines the problems of suggesting it as a solitary solution to corrupt readings. An emendation (1) must be intrinsically suitable, and (2) must account for readings transmitted in the text. An emendation must prove itself to be naturally suitable and inevitable in order to lend a high degree of probability, without which, such a solution would “remain doubtful.”⁴² They also observe that many who propose conjectural emendations as solutions to potentially corrupt readings tend to do so prematurely and that more caution is required before scholars adopt such corrections.⁴³

³⁹ Murphy–O’Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians*, p. 271.

⁴⁰ As exemplified by Michael F. Hull: “without other manuscripts, nothing can be proven, and Walker’s argument is from silence” (*Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), p. 75).

⁴¹ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 70.

⁴² Bruce M. Metzger & Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (4th ed; New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 227-28.

⁴³ Metzger & Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament*, 230-31. For more discussion of this controversy see Ryan Donald Wettlaufer, *No Longer Written: The Use of Conjectural Emendation in the Restoration of the New Testament, the Epistle of James as a Case Study*, New Testament Tools, Studies and Documents Vol. 44 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 4, n. 5.

In summary, using textual evidence as the first step to assess potential interpolations carries both great potential and grave risks. On the one hand, the absence of textual variants should not be the deciding factor for interpolations as there are other elements yet to be considered that may point favourably in that direction. Alternatively, if there *is* an omission, Walker insists that the best explanation of such a phenomenon would provide evidence for an interpolation. This is demonstrably not the case. Could one not also say that the best explanation for a stable textual transmission is a higher probability of a genuine passage? Walker appears to minimise the textual evidence when there are *no* variants yet maximises its implications when there *are* variants. When this explicitly one-sided approach is set aside, the textual data becomes far less conclusive than Walker presents it. In sum, I agree with Walker that the textual evidence cannot be used to outright dismiss an interpolation theory. Nevertheless, it also cannot be used to definitively increase the probability beyond reasonable doubt. Each suggestion must be taken on a case-by-case basis with additional support from the following criteria.

2.2 - Contextual Evidence

According to Walker, if a passage appears out of place in its present location or “interrupts” the context in which it is found, an interpolation is possible. There are several contextual indications that might assist an interpolation theory: (1) the repetition of a significant word or phrase from the verse immediately preceding or proceeding the passage, (2) the presence of one or two seemingly insignificant textual variations, or (3) a “tonal” shift, where a verse occurs in an emotionally or atmospherically contrasting passage, may indicate a significant enough interruption that an interpolation might be warranted.⁴⁴ Not only would the removal of suspected passages rescue the flow of thought, but they can often be identified as “independent, self-contained units.”⁴⁵ This may suggest the insertion of preformed or traditional material derived from a locale other than that which Paul wrote from (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1).

⁴⁴ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 73, n. 33.

⁴⁵ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 73.

In some cases, however, the content of a suspected passage can do little to suggest interpolation. If a passage such as Paul's comments on women and silence in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 was a deliberate later insertion, we should expect an interpolator to weave their additions seamlessly into the text. From this, Walker suggests that

In some cases, of course, an interpolator or a later copyist, seeking to smooth out an otherwise rough transition between the passage in question and its immediate context, may have made slight modifications in the material immediately preceding and/or following the passage; in such cases, the removal of the passage in question might result in a less smooth transition from the material preceding to that immediately following the passage.⁴⁶

Such an explanation is possible and perhaps even expected, but is of course unprovable. This lends to the difficulty of using surrounding context to determine and isolate an unoriginal passage. If the suggestion is that the original context has been appropriated and woven *into* the interpolation (or the new context of the interpolation is woven into the original), that very same contextual data may now work against an interpolation theory. Sandnes explains further:

Interpolations are by their very nature dual; that is, they are in some way interrupting the context, and simultaneously, they often pick up on the very context. Hence, arguments can be used both ways, either supportive of authenticity or vice versa. The thing is that precisely the presence of both kinds of arguments may be an indication of its dubious character.⁴⁷

In other words, Sandnes argues that a contextual duality exists with a suggested interpolation. There was obviously a reason why an interpolator chose a particular passage to insert their new material. In the case of 1 Cor. 14:34–35, the shared themes of speech, submission, and silence weave the passage into its context. It takes up the meaning and intention of 1 Corinthians and reappropriates it for itself. If the passage

⁴⁶ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 73, n. 34.

⁴⁷ Sandnes, *Paul Perceived*, p. 119.

was not written by Paul, an interpolator has reworked features of the letter's immediate context for their literary purposes.

Two problems arise from this. Firstly, there is no way of determining on contextual grounds alone that the passage has been woven into its location or if the passage is simply genuine and fits into its present location because Paul really did write it. As per Sandnes' argument, the context can instead be used to support the genuineness of the passage if it does in fact fit. We have no way to decide which direction the contextual evidence should lead us. Walker's propensity towards an interpolation would incline him in the direction of his own position, but such evidence is supportive of authenticity for others. Secondly, this contextual consideration is not, in and of itself, inconsistent with Pauline authorship. Paul could have plausibly performed the insertion prior to the letter's dispatch.⁴⁸ It is here where Walker's definition of an interpolation suffers in its exclusion of Paul himself as a potential interpolator.

An adequately woven passage will clearly not be the case for every suspected interpolation, otherwise the very endeavour of searching for interpolations would become highly problematic. We are therefore dependant on scribes leaving behind traceable markers for us to follow in order to isolate any later additions. This, however, requires the scribe in question to be somewhat sloppy in their copying process and not all scribes were of the same skill level. Thus, despite its potential, we must avoid using the context of a letter as a blanket argument for interpolations in every one of Paul's letters.

2.3 - Linguistic Evidence

Walker is also fond of evidence that is *linguistic*, where the passage being judged uses vocabulary or stylistic features that are distinctive from "normal" Pauline language. To make this criterion more effective, Walker posits a fourfold division of material that is characteristically Pauline or un-Pauline: (1) distinctively Pauline (present in the authentic Pauline materials but not in other early Christian literature), (2) Pauline, but

⁴⁸ See, for example, Galatians 6:11 which interrupts the flow of the passage but is clearly an addition made by Paul to add emphasis or differentiate this verse from that being written by his amanuensis. See discussion in Craig S. Keener, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), pp. 559-63; Richards, *Letter-Writing*, pp. 101-03.

not distinctively so (present both in the authentic Pauline letters and in other early Christian literature), (3) non–Pauline, but not identifiably post–Pauline (present neither in the authentic Pauline letters nor in the extant post–Pauline Christian literature); (4) distinctively post–Pauline (present in early post–Pauline Christian literature including the pseudo–Pauline writings but not in the authentic Pauline letters).⁴⁹ Each of the four types of material proposed by Walker either strengthens (1 and 2) or weakens (3 and 4) the authenticity of a passage. This assists us in gleaning types of language that would be used by Paul but not by other New Testament writers or early fathers.

Nevertheless, as with all the evidence types assessed thus far, Walker admits that linguistic evidence can be “highly problematic.”⁵⁰ For starters, “the sample is too small to be statistically significant”⁵¹ as Murphy–O’Connor contends. Despite having a large pool of material that we can draw on and compare to see what language may or may not fit with Paul’s syntax and vocabulary, there is a great uncertainty that looms over our heads when we perform this kind of analysis. How much do we really know about Paul’s linguistic proclivities? What grounds are there for positing that he could not transgress those boundaries?

Furthermore, just because a passage may be identified as unlike something Paul would say, it does not necessarily mean it is a “post–dispatch” interpolation, as Richards affirms.⁵² Walker acknowledges that distinctive vocabulary and linguistic variations can also be the result of any number of alternatives including quotations from opponents, incorporation of traditional material, unique subject matter, rhetorical purposes, etc.⁵³ Yet these considerations are absent from his assessment. Once again, Walker’s definition of interpolations comes back to haunt him: the notion of a genuine Pauline interpolation has already been excised by his narrow classification.

Linked to the question of language is that of rhetorical devices and structure. If a passage can be demonstrated to have invaded a rhetorical chiasmus with an alien sentence structure or length, an interpolation may be suggested. For example, David Oliver Smith’s recent publication on the integrity of Paul’s letters⁵⁴ argues that out of

⁴⁹ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 77.

⁵⁰ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 76.

⁵¹ Murphy–O’Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians*, p. 271.

⁵² Richards, *Letter Writing*, pp. 102, 106–07; this contention is echoed by Jermo van Nes, *Pauline Language and the Pastoral Epistles* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), p. 132.

⁵³ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 76.

⁵⁴ David Oliver Smith, *The Pauline Letters: A Rhetorical Analysis* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2022).

98 suggested interpolations in the Pauline corpus (62 of which Walker suggested in his 2001 monograph) there are 22 in the undisputed letters can be confirmed through rhetorical analysis.

In the same vein, however, Smith states that his analysis cannot confirm Walker's suggestion of interpolations in 1 Corinthians 2:6–16, 10:1–22, and 12:31b–14:1a among others.⁵⁵ While it may be said that Walker has overstated the extent of interpolations, Smith's rhetorical analysis suggests that there are at least some interpolations in Paul's letters. Smith claims to confirm several interpolations using rhetorical analysis including Romans 10:6–7; 1 Corinthians 9:5–7, 11:3–16, 14:32–36, 15:3–11, 15:29, and the entirety of chapter 8; Galatians 2:2, 2:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:15–16.⁵⁶

Without commenting on the veracity of each suggestion assessed by Smith, it seems that rhetorical and structural analysis can be double sided and may also be used against interpolation theories. George Barr's scalometric studies of Paul's letters analysed the number and length of sentences in the Pauline literature.⁵⁷ Contrary to Walker, he finds no patterns to indicate that the passage would flow better if 1 Corinthians 2:6–16 is removed, and that removing the passage would even damage the Pauline rhythm of the letter.⁵⁸ Although perhaps not to the degree that Walker anticipated, language structures clearly have an important role to play in the debate of interpolations, even if their results can be contradictory.

2.4 - Ideational Evidence

This final piece of evidence contends that a passage contains substantive amounts of un-Pauline ideas or is at odds with what is found in Paul's other letters. Here, Walker reiterates his fourfold distinction of the evidence to sift ideas present in a passage that are difficult to reconcile with Paul's other writings.

We must ask, however, whether we know enough about Paul and his thought-life to adequately determine what ideas are truly "incompatible" with something he

⁵⁵ Smith, *Rhetorical Analysis*, pp. 26, 154, 156–7, 356.

⁵⁶ Smith, *Rhetorical Analysis*, p. 356.

⁵⁷ George K. Barr, "Interpolations, Pseudographs, and the New Testament Epistles," *Literary and Linguistic Computing* Vol. 17, No. 4 (2002), pp. 439-455.

⁵⁸ George K. Barr, *Scalometry and the Pauline Epistles* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2004), pp. 59–60.

would write—a similar problem that the linguistic evidence faces. Patrick Hart, in his 2018 doctoral thesis, reassesses Pauline studies via the need for a “Archimedean point.” The Cartesian concept of an Archimedean point has occasionally been applied to Paul in the attempt to try and find the “centre” of his worldview from which all Pauline studies can branch out from.⁵⁹ Hart observes that without such a concrete foundation for studying Paul, we cannot confidently establish more advanced criteria for identifying interpolations in his writings.⁶⁰ In short, to know what Paul didn't say, we need to know the heart of what he did say.

But this is clearly something yet to be achieved; it is unlikely that there will ever be a consensus on what Paul's “centre” is. In other words, “how do you go about determining is ‘central’ in letters that are clearly occasional?”⁶¹ Without that Archimedean point, interpolation theories based on ideational evidence rest on our imperfect understanding about the nature of the author whose work is suspected of being tampered with. Similar to the linguistic evidence above, the general deficit of our knowledge about Paul looms over our study of him which many scholars refuse to acknowledge. As Hart puts it, “our purported familiarity with Paul is something of a façade.”⁶²

Walker's innate scepticism of interpolations raises another question. If every passage in Paul's letters is to be subject to the scrutiny of interpolation theories, this would inadvertently make our evaluations a hopeless endeavour: how can we really posit a fruitful comparison to “legitimate” Pauline material when *any* passage could be an interpolation? If everything is “up for grabs” as Walker says,⁶³ then we have no real knowledge about what Paul said at all, thus no linguistic analysis is possible.

Furthermore, as pointed out by Jermo van Nes,⁶⁴ if an exegete can posit consistent and plausible reasons as to why Paul could have written a passage that might appear consistent with his thought, there is less reason to suggest interpolation. One should take refuge in interpolation theories only if the exegete fails to reveal any

⁵⁹ See for example Benjamin L. White, *Remembering Paul: Ancient and Modern Contests Over the Image of the Apostle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 24; Michael F. Bird, *An Anomalous Jew: Paul Among Jews, Greeks, and Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), p. 170.

⁶⁰ Patrick Hart, *A Prolegomenon to the Study of Paul* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 130–31.

⁶¹ David B. Capes, Rodney Reeves, and E Randolph Richards, *Rediscovering Paul: An Introduction to His World, Letters, and Thought* (2nd edition; Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2017), p. 354.

⁶² Hart, *Prolegomenon*, p. 4.

⁶³ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 60.

⁶⁴ Van Nes, *Pauline Language*, p. 133.

genuine coherence in a suspected passage. Indeed, as Murphy–O'Connor emphasises, "Everything depends on the quality of the exegesis and the care with which the comparison is carried out."⁶⁵ Ultimately, there remain remarkable problems for the use of ideational evidence. Contrary to the earlier argumentation of Walker and Munro, there is in fact a degree of speculation that lends to a fearfully one-sided assessment of the letters. Hogeterp summarises this concern when he says

The evaluation of certain ideational, situational, or motivational evidence for an interpolation depend on the critic's understanding of Paul's theology and Paul's reaction to certain rhetorical situations. Thus, the argument for interpolation may sometimes depend on subjective grounds.⁶⁶

2.5 - Conclusion Relative to the Initial Indicators

It is clear that many problems linger regarding our process of finding interpolations that are beyond the scope of this project. The application of the criteria listed above remains a contentious issue. We have seen that all of the above evidence for interpolations, both positive and negative, carry problems in both theory and application. Many are plagued by speculation and conjecture, as both Walker himself and his critics have rightly noted. If each one is taken by themselves and in isolation, there is little that can be said as to whether an interpolation has really taken place; even a significant textual omission cannot be used by itself to infer an interpolation.

Moreover, even with a cumulative case where all strands of evidence converge to make a compelling argument for a passage's inauthenticity, each thread of such a hypothesis is subject to scrutiny. Only when a set of arguments—where each of which are demonstrated to be probable to a high degree—produces a cogent overall conclusion can they be considered probable.⁶⁷ Should these threads be pulled out of place by contrary argumentation that is consistent and well-evidenced—even as to only weaken their veracity instead of outright refuting them—interpolation theories lose their potency. From this, it is vital to ensure that Walker's background evidence does

⁶⁵ Murphy–O'Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians*, p. 271.

⁶⁶ Albert L. A. Hogeterp, *Paul and God's Temple: A Historical Interpretation of Cultic Imagery in the Corinthian Correspondence*, Biblical Tools and Studies Vol. 2 (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), pp. 277–78.

⁶⁷ See Murphy–O'Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians*, p. 271.

not become a criterion in and of itself; a sort of last resort on the part of the interpolation advocate to obscure our “certainty” over the integrity of the Pauline literature.

3. Final Thoughts

We may conclude this study with several observations. Firstly, the state of Pauline studies would do well to heed Walker’s call for better criteria. Culminating after a long career in the field, Walker’s monograph remains a pristine example of worthwhile scholarship that attempts to illuminate our understanding of early Christianity through the demand for improved methods. Just as how the current fourth Quest for the Historical Jesus has shed association with the previously accepted criteria of authenticity,⁶⁸ we who partake in Pauline studies must also avoid complacency in our methods at all cost, lest our discipline become deadlocked by unproven assumptions.

Secondly, while the combined strength of these criteria and the background evidence may be valuable in supporting an interpolation in any given part of the Pauline letters, it is apparent that further research is required. The possibility of identifying a Pauline focal point or establishing universally accepted criteria is diminished by the inherently subjective nature of these discussions and the limitations of the available evidence. This calls for even more caution; a caution that Walker appears to fail to apply when he looks at individual passages in his book. In the latter stages of *Interpolations*, Walker presents one-sided cases for some of the passages he views as interpolations and prefaces the discussion by declaring that he “will not offer a critical evaluation of the arguments for interpolation, nor will I respond to scholars who have attempted to refute these arguments. Rather, in each case, I will simply summarize the case for interpolation.”⁶⁹ It is inexplicable why he does not interact with the counterarguments that were readily available at the time of his writing, especially given that the existence of these potential interpolations buttresses his “almost certain” case for interpolations elsewhere.

It is unlikely that Walker was correct regarding all the interpolations he suggested. Over and against his insistence of the pervasiveness of the practice, Smith concluded his rhetorical study by saying that “interpolations are not nearly as extensive

⁶⁸ Chris Keith and James Crossley (eds.), *The Next Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Eerdmans, forthcoming 2024).

⁶⁹ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 190.

as the literature would suggest.”⁷⁰ Such a contention is central to Walker’s *a-priori* methodology and if the most recent work has called into question these suggestions, Walker’s case appears to stand on unfirm foundations. Surveying the responses to Walker reveals an ironic predicament: his desire for a “consensus regarding the appropriate criteria”⁷¹ appears to have created even *more* disagreement over what that appropriate criteria should be.

We may summarise this project by echoing the heed for caution by Sandnes. The very nature of our investigation as a historical enterprise is wracked with philosophical conundrums and controversies, endlessly debating the extent to which we can reconstruct texts.⁷² I found that Walker came across as too confident when applying criteria that he himself labelled as “non-conclusive.”⁷³ In sum, to rigorously investigate the phenomenon on interpolations in Paul, we would do well to follow the path he laid out before us whilst avoiding the pitfalls he appeared to fall into himself.

⁷⁰ Smith, *Rhetorical Analysis*, p. 356; this is concluded despite Smith’s agreement to the 22 of Walker’s interpolations that his study supports.

⁷¹ Walker, “Text–Critical,” p. 624.

⁷² For recent essays on the nature of historical investigation, see Helen Carr and Suzannah Lipscomb, *What Is History, Now? How the Past and Present Speak to Each Other* (UK: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2021). See also the classic defence of the discipline by Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (GB: Granta Books, 1997) which strikes a balance between traditional and postmodern historiography. Also worth looking at is the application of Bayes Theorem to the evaluation of prior probabilities in history. See Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 92-111.

⁷³ Walker, *Interpolations*, p. 69 (in relation to Rom. 16:25-17).

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