

■ PREFACE

THIS BOOK MIGHT be called a commentary upon one of the most abused passages in the Pauline correspondence—1 Cor. 9:19-22,¹ which reads:

19 For though I am free with respect to all,
I have made myself a slave to all,
so that I might win more of them.

20 To the Jews I became as a Jew,
in order to win Jews.

21 To those under the law I became as one under the law
(though I myself am not under the law)
so that I might win those under the law.

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law
(though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law)
so that I might win those outside the law.

22 To the weak I became weak,
so that I might win the weak.
I have become all things to all people,
that I might by all means save some.

This carefully fashioned rhetorical piece (the climax of Paul's argument that the essence of freedom resides in the possibility of renouncing one's due) refers to the poles, or boundaries, of his missionary strategy. The apostle could not "become a Jew" because he *was* a Jew.² Concessions to Torah would have been restricted to circumstances in which there was no substantial body of gentile believers; for the weak he was prepared to adapt his own behavior, as a limited strategy.³ In the course of time, Paul

would become something like all things to all people: a gentile to the gentiles, a sinner for the sinners, a Gnostic for the Gnostics, a radical for the radicals, a conservative for the conservatives... The objective of this book is to describe how this protean apostle came to take his shapes.

SOMETIME DURING THE opening years of the fourth decade of the Common Era, one Paul, a Greek-speaking Diaspora Jew who belonged to the Pharisaic party, underwent an important change. Hitherto an opponent of the people who followed Jesus of Nazareth, he joined that very group and became a missionary to the gentile world. As an element of that missionary activity Paul would, from time to time, compose letters, a number of which have survived. This heritage makes him unique, for he is the only Christian of the first two generations whose direct first-person testimony survives, the sole example prior to Ignatius, a bishop of Antioch executed at Rome in the first third of the second century.

Views and opinions, prejudices and conclusions, attitudes and convictions about the early Christian missionary Paul are as numerous as needles in a pine forest, but there is probably one matter about which the majority of Paul's subsequent admirers, despisers, and ignorers would happily agree: the historical Paul was not "all things to all people." Persons of that ilk exist, the most famous of which enjoy the sort of immortality fiction alone can bestow: Polonius. To move closer to Paul's own time: the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls had a properly scriptural phrase for this type, "seekers after smooth things."⁴ Seekers after smooth things we shall always have with us, reconcilers at times, sycophants at others, oily manipulators or astute pourers of oil upon troubled waters. Of all the accusations made against Paul, the least probable is that he sought to say only what others wished to hear—which is not to say that this accusation was not circulated (cf. Gal. 5:11).

No one approaches Paul in influence upon the theology and history of Christianity. Those who prefer quantitative approaches might note that, of the twenty-seven writings comprising the New Testament, thirteen are letters attributed to Paul, while a fourteenth, Hebrews, owes its place to association with him. Pauline influence of one sort or another can be attributed to at least three of the other letters (1 and 2 Peter, James), while his practice of writing letters influenced the prevalence of this form (Jude, possibly 2 and 3 John, and very probably Revelation). Paul is the principal character in Acts, the largest work in the New Testament Canon, while his

thought influenced the Gospels of Matthew (negatively) and Luke (positively). Only Mark and John stand quite outside of the Pauline orbit—and a case for indirect influence upon Mark can be advanced. No person is named more often than Paul in the surviving Christian literature of the second century.⁵ The ultimate result of this influence is that:

Paul is one of the leading *heroes* of the Christian life, faith, and story. He is also a *villain* worthy of comparison with Judas. Finally, he is the archetypal *victim*, worthy of comparison with Jesus. Many of those who celebrate Paul as their hero also rejoice in his victimization, an understanding that has played a major role in Pauline scholarship of the last century and a half. The villain role, for its part, retains much vitality. Many persons have a substantial investment in Paul as either villain or victim. One whose research focus is ancient popular narrative can confirm that victims and villains tend to yield good propaganda or melodrama. As scholarly categories they are somewhat wanting. The following caricature is one that few would accept in so unvarnished a form, but it has elements that continue to exert a pull upon popular scholarship and understanding. It was still current when I began my graduate studies in 1971.

At some point, probably around the turn of the first century CE, the letters of Paul were gathered into a collection and circulated among believers. Why this happened is, to plunder Eph. 5:32, a great mystery.⁶ In due course Marcion, who alone of second-century Christians really understood Paul (although he, in fact, misunderstood him), acquired the franchise to the Pauline legacy.⁷ In orthodox circles the apostle went under a cloud, from which he was ultimately extricated through substantial revision of both the corpus of writings and his theology, not to mention the appearance of the book of Acts. To all intents and purposes Abraham was left without a legitimate heir, for the Paulinism of Irenaeus and his successors was no more than the debased offspring of a concubine.

Thirteen centuries later, at the time of the Reformation,⁸ the real Paul was excavated from the accumulated debris of the patristic and medieval eras. Thereafter one task, at least for Protestant historians of interpretation, became the exposure of the extent to which earlier interpreters had not understood Paul. Since the Enlightenment, it has transpired that even the canonical Paul is something of a hybrid creature. Johann S. Semler (1725–1791) and Ferdinand C. Baur (1792–1860), among others, demonstrated that it is not possible to make a sharp distinction between Scripture and Tradition.⁹ Scripture is itself the product of tradition and contains Pauline letters that Paul did not write. The real Paul is to be discovered

in the contingent, historical circumstances of his seven undisputed—but not integral—letters,¹⁰ with greater or lesser supplements from Acts. Paul, like his Lord, was not betrayed by external enemies but from within the circle of his own students who sold out his theology while concocting letters in his name, as well as other texts relating to him.

NOW THERE IS more than a little truth, if little nuance, in this caricature, but it is not without flaws. The dual impact of Christian ecumenism and postmodernism has challenged the claim to be able to make a timeless and definitive interpretation of Paul. Even among the mainstream of traditional, Western, interpreters there is no reigning consensus about the center of Paul's own theology, and this tradition can no longer claim either objectivity or exclusive authority. The thrust of the following pages is toward defining profiles of Paul and Paulinism in terms of the needs, questions, and values of the persons, groups, or movements represented in various texts. Specifically, I wish to describe how Paul becomes a, even *the*, pillar and founder of catholic Christianity, by which I mean the emerging "great church" of the period from 150–250 CE, and later. In order to accomplish this great task Paul (not unlike Jesus) had to die.

The canonical Acts reports in ch. 9 what is called the Conversion of Paul. This account includes the traditional signs attending the overpowering and conversion of one who resists the divine will, and presents the event as an epiphany, as a manifestation of heavenly light. The form of this presentation is quite appropriate, for the result of that change was an explosion. The world has not been the same since; that explosion still affects us, with echoes yet resounding, in settings both familiar and strange. The question of who Paul was and is has received a variety of answers, more than one of which is reflected in the New Testament. One often hears that history is written by the winners. This is an important half-truth, or more than a half-truth, but it is not the full truth.¹¹ It is more apposite to say that historians enjoy one great blessing, the advantage of hindsight, and one tormenting curse, the disadvantage of hindsight. Knowing the effects, researchers are prone to rummage through the data in pursuit of their causes. Much is overlooked in that process. One feature of this book is to attend to some of what has been overlooked without neglecting the broad picture.

The New Testament as we have it reflects to a remarkable extent the influence of Pauline Christianity in both favorable and hostile ways. The

forms of Christianity that eventually triumphed were Greek-speaking and gentile in orientation. Only relatively less advanced traces of “Jewish Christianity” and “Judeo-Christianity,” that is, movements more closely linked to traditional Jewish observance, emerge within the New Testament canon, which consists entirely of documents written in Greek.¹² This is not to say that the picture of Paul arising from the New Testament texts alone is one that Paul would have painted—far from it.

The portraits of Paul that emerge in early (and subsequent) Christianity do not arise from any concern to preserve history for the benefit of subsequent investigators; they seek to address the problems of those churches in their own times. In those endeavors, they found the letters of Paul and images of him to be both valuable and vexing. But both images and epistles endured, surprisingly. Why should letters written by a missionary to churches that he could not visit in person just then have survived? The answer is far from obvious.

It is easier to understand the impact of Paul’s mission. Many of the communities of believers in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece traced their origins to him. Paul was, however, a controversial figure, both during and after his lifetime, and the blessing of Pauline origins could be regarded as mixed. The canonical figure of Paul is shaped, and largely still determined, by the book of Acts. This, the second of two anonymous volumes written by an author traditionally known as Luke, stands in the current New Testament as a bridge between the Gospels and the Epistles.¹³ At its conclusion Paul has arrived in Rome, where, although in theory a prisoner, he will carry out an unhindered mission. The next document is none other than Paul’s letter to the Romans. Placed as it is, Acts serves as a hermeneutical key to Paul, as the pattern by which Paul is to be interpreted. As such, it bears comparison with the letters.

The above summary points out one aspect of Paul’s biography that the author of Acts did not choose to mention: his execution by the Roman government. For many, this fate was an embarrassment. A cursory reading of Acts reveals that Paul, following his miraculous conversion, promptly repaired to Jerusalem and conferred with the apostles there; that he carried out a mission always in touch with the leaders of the Jerusalem church; that his labors began, whenever possible, within the local synagogues, and that the gentile mission proper followed only upon rejections by the majority of the Jewish people (rejections repeated at every key point in the story); that Paul was a powerful preacher and worker of miracles; and that his theology was the quite congruent with that of Peter and James.

One would not gather, from reading Acts, that Paul ever engaged in a lengthy conflict with other followers of Jesus, and that relations between him and Jerusalem were often strained. Nor would one imagine, from this account, that Paul ever wrote a letter. This is not precisely the picture that emerges from reading Paul, who reports conflict with Peter, difficulties in relationships with Jerusalem, accusations of inability to preach effectively or to work adequate miracles, and so on. Nor do these letters permit any doubt that Paul had a particular theological understanding often at odds with the views of others.¹⁴ Dissonance between Acts and the letters is but one of many complicated issues requiring exploration.¹⁵

SINCE THIS IS not intended to be a comprehensive monograph, it is selective in approach. The governing method is to concentrate upon a number of entire works rather than piecemeal examination of a broad range of texts. Organization of a study like this is another challenge. Shall one follow a strictly chronological line or divide the material into categories? The chronological approach permits something approximating a continuous narrative. Categorical structures allow the comparison of apples with apples. Selection of categories is problematic and may require extensive justification. Geography is another component deserving attention. How, for example, were people utilizing Pauline letters and stories in Rome in 100, 150, and 175 CE? No solution is ideal. The path chosen here is mixed. After an introduction comes a chapter showing how Paul became, and remained, a book. The next three chapters use genre—letters and narratives—as their basis, at which point the method shifts to a thematic analysis. Compromise applies also to the chronological range. The thematic survey closes c. 180, with the synthesis of Irenaeus of Lyons. This is an intelligent stopping point. With regard to genres, however, these limits have been surpassed, since it is easier—albeit potentially more deceptive—for readers to connect letters attributed to Paul and material about him to earlier writings of similar type. These genres come to their own conclusions, at different times. All choices involve compromises and the absence of perfect symmetry. My hope is that the structure will be useful for readers.

The story of this book is nearly as complicated as its subject. Its genesis was a series of lectures on the urban background of nascent Christianity delivered in the mid-1980s at the Church of the Ascension, Chicago. In 1991, at the suggestion of Helmut Koester, a contract to

produce a manuscript on “Paul in History and Tradition” was executed. Basic research was facilitated by a graduate seminar on the subject at Notre Dame in 1992, followed by an upper level undergraduate course at Northwestern University in 1997, along with a regularly offered course on selected Pauline Epistles at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston. Intermittent work continued until 2000, but much of my energy had been diverted to the preparation of a number of essays on ancient fiction in the context of early Judaism and early Christianity, and by the obligation to execute a commentary on Acts. Research and writing on Acts occupied me entirely from Winter 2002 until Spring 2007. Only in May of that year did I return to this project, a draft of which was completed in May 2008. An advantage of this delay is that ideas, like a good wine, have been given time to mature.

This is the only book I have written that has taken shape in the course of teaching over many years in various settings and courses. It is therefore dedicated, with gratitude, to my students at various institutions, from 1971 to 2001. Specific thanks are due to Philip Sellev, Julian V. Hills, François Bovon, Abraham Malherbe, Mark Reasoner, Clare Rothschild, and Matthew Skinner.