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The Paul Quest, Ben Witherington, III

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Book Reviews

Markus H. McDowell,
Eleanor Daniel,
Editors

Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 347 pages including appendixes and indexes. Reviewed by Peggy A. Vining.

New Testament readers do not often envision the apostle Paul as a social outcast and religious fanatic. Ben Witherington III, however, calls attention to these and other generally overlooked Pauline personality traits in his investigation of the historical evidence surrounding the Jew from Tarsus.. This study is a careful examination of Paul's social and cultural background, in light of recent and fresh approaches to the Pauline epistles, that presents a credible defense for "what sort of person Paul was" (p. 13).

Only three years after his groundbreaking continuation of the search for the historical Jesus (*The Jesus Quest*; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995; rev. 1997),

Witherington here presents a depiction of the apostle Paul's personage that firmly dismisses all notions of Paul's resembling a modern-day individual. Many studies today tend to examine Paul under the assumption that all peoples are basically the same regardless of culture, education, and environment. Other modern studies operate under the guise of a twentieth-century mindset, applying the techniques of psychology to Paul's theologizing as well as to his psyche. Witherington tries to remedy "such anachronism" with a cultural anthropological approach and asserts that as a first-century Mediterranean person, Paul would have held some unique characteristics not often recognized by current scholarship (p. 17).

Among the most significant of these characteristics is the dyadic personality, in which ancient peoples found their worth not as individuals but as members of their particular social

network. Indeed, Paul's emphasis on community supposes that he derived his self-understanding from the specific group of which he was a member. At the same time, however, Witherington seeks to show that Paul, in finding his identity in a *new* community, made himself a deviant and an outsider to many. Two other facets of the first-century person pertain specifically to personality traits. First, the outer physical appearance was considered to be a mirror of the internal personality. Second, the personality was considered fixed at birth; therefore, its metamorphosis would have been incomprehensible to ancients. Also fixed were the "3 gs," which determined permanent station in life: geography, gender, and generation. Witherington deftly interweaves these and other traits (outlined in chapter 1) with information gleaned from Pauline writings to recognize the disparity between ancient and modern-day individuals.

In the following seven chapters, along with the conclusion, the author expands the concept of Paul's first-century personality and explores a number of life roles played by Paul. He uses rhetorical analysis and social-historical approaches to Paul's letters as foundation for his assessments. To achieve the most accurate portrait, Witherington focuses on the less disputed Pauline writings and uses the debated epistles and Acts as material only to provide corroboration for his conclusions. Throughout, he intersperses his ideas with those of other notable Pauline scholars. He is fair and unbiased in his comparison, and he thoroughly outlines alternate theories. He investigates Paul in his roles as Jew, Roman citizen, and Christian; writer and rhetor; prophet and apostle; realist and radical; anthropologist and advocate; storyteller and exegete; and ethicist and theologian. A lengthy appendix also unravels the timeline of Paul's life.

Among the many observations here, the most valuable include that Paul "stepped down the social ladder to reach as wide an audience for the gospel as possible" (p. 128) and that he "worked with social structures and networks as he found them, seeking to reform them within the Christian community" (p. 224). These conclusions are very different from some of the familiar ideas of Paul as poor tentmaker or silencer of women. In the case of the former, rhetorical analysis and close historical study of Paul's letters imply that

Paul was indeed an educated man, most likely a highly hellenized man, and not from the lower echelons of society. In the case of the latter, Witherington shows that Paul was in fact a champion of women in his society and that he sought to give them more choices than the standard Greco-Roman options.

Witherington portrays Paul as an innovator and a man who managed to be a radical without creating disturbing waves. Paul worked for change within existing social structures, taking them as they were and introducing modifications that implemented the values of Christ. He was wise in discerning that change comes best in small gradations. Paul went against the grain of first-century civilization, and his midlife conversion and subsequent devotion to Christianity branded him a fanatic. His society did not believe in such drastic transformations. Witherington, however, portrays Paul as comfortable with himself despite his status as outcast, because as an ancient dyadic person, he found his identity in Christ and in the new Christian fellowship. In this individualistic age, we can learn from this depiction of Paul and remember the value of Christian community: "his identity was established by whose he was, not who he was" (p. 299).

A thorough and first-rate work, this study touches on almost every conceivable aspect of Pauline scholarship, from the aforementioned personality assessment to the likely places from which Paul gleaned his

theology. The text describes the basic biblical content about Paul while at the same time exploring its depths. Even a beginner to Pauline studies will find clear explanations of the subject matter. A small annoyance is the way the synopses that begin each chapter overlap in many places word-for-word with the later text. Also, some of Witherington's interpretations of Pauline theological thought will seem wide of the mark to many Church of Christ readers (the remarks on baptism on p. 282, for example).

Understanding the historical Paul should be crucial to any serious student of Christianity, because the degree of Paul's impact on the church is incalculable. As Witherington points out, Paul made Christianity the "Gentile-dominated entity it has been for almost all of the last two thousand years" (p. 303). Without Paul, Christianity might have remained only a small Jewish sect. To understand adequately Paul's methods and ideas, we must be able to re-create as closely as possible the historical circumstances of his letters. Witherington brings a freshness to these oft-read epistles by recognizing Paul as a human being unique to his original social and cultural setting, which is a necessary focus toward discerning their original intent.

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Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *The Road from Damascus: The Impact of Paul's Conversion on His Life, Thought, and Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Reviewed by Ronald L. Tyler.

This book is the second volume of the McMaster New Testament Studies series, edited by Richard N. Longenecker. In this volume, eleven contributors address the influence of Paul's conversion on his life, thought, and ministry. It is written in a popular style and contains no footnotes, yet it has a learned audience in view. A selected bibliography follows each article. The book is indexed by subjects, authors, and scripture and ancient references. It addresses a number of topics and issues, such as history of interpretation, christology, eschatology, Gentile mission, justification, reconciliation, covenant theology, the Mosaic law, the Holy Spirit, women, and ethics. Below, I provide a brief overview of each article.

In the first article, "History of Interpretation," Bruce Corley presents a competent survey of scholarship regarding Paul's conversion. He selects what he considers to be landmark writings. This chapter is a good entry into the discussion of how Paul's conversion influenced his life.

Richard Longenecker, in "A Realized Hope, a New Commitment, and a Developed Proclamation: Paul and Jesus," correctly develops the thesis that Paul's theology was rooted in an understanding that Jesus is the Messiah

rather than merely in apocalypticism.

The following article, "A New Understanding of the Present and the Future: Paul and Eschatology," by I. Howard Marshall, is an exceptional entry-level study of Paul's eschatology. Marshall examines five aspects: (1) the messiahship of Jesus, (2) his risen status, (3) the gift of the Spirit, (4) the age of the Torah as superseded by the age of the Messiah, and (5) the mission to the Gentiles.

Terence Donaldson presents "The Origin of Paul's Gentile Mission." He correctly writes that Paul was a zealous Jew and proselytizer who had a world-transforming vision of the risen Christ and felt called to offer full membership in the people of God to Gentiles. Donaldson sees Paul as working with two views of Israel: ethnic Israel and spiritual Israel.

James Dunn, in "Paul and Justification by Faith," argues that justification by faith relates to Paul's conversion, not as one who finally found peace with God, nor as one who turned from a legalistic Judaism to Christianity, but as one who found the roots of his ancestral faith in the call and promise to Abraham.

In "God Reconciled His Enemy to Himself: The Origin of Paul's Concept of Reconciliation," Seyoon Kim presents various elements of the Pauline concept of reconciliation and then examines 2 Cor 5:11-21. Kim argues that Paul's view of reconciliation grew out of his reflections upon the Damascus Road

experience, in which he understood God as having reconciled people to himself through the cross. Kim suggests that Paul expressed this view through his use of the servant song of Isaiah 52-53 and church tradition regarding Jesus.

The following article, "Contours of Covenant Theology in the Post-Conversion Paul," by Bruce Longenecker, sketches certain aspects of Pauline thought (mostly from Galatians and Romans). Longenecker notes that covenant themes are often found in Paul. This is significant since Jesus Christ fills Paul's covenant imagery. The post-conversion Paul focused on what God has done in his son, using rich metaphors from his Jewish heritage to express this redemptive action of God.

In "Sinai as Viewed from Damascus: Paul's Reevaluation of the Mosaic Law," Stephen Westerholm traces what he believes to be Paul's changed perspective on the Mosaic law by eight theses with exegetical underpinnings. He concludes that once Paul believed that the Messiah had been crucified, he came to understand that neither Sinaitic Torah nor any other Jewish institutions brought redemption. Paul came to believe that everything before Christ was preparatory for his redemptive coming.

Gordon Fee, in "Paul's Conversion as the Key to His Understanding of the Spirit," surveys the Spirit in Paul's theology and the Pauline conversion texts. He concludes that Paul knew that the

Spirit was important in the lives of believers. Fee stresses the present tense of the Spirit in Pauline writings. He concludes that this is best understood as stemming from Paul's own vital experience of the Spirit as the life-giving spirit of the living God at his conversion.

"Paul on Women and Gender: A Comparison with Early Jewish Views," by Judith Gundry-Volf, is a well-written and clearly organized essay that compares Paul with three Jewish sources: Sirach, Philo of Alexandria, and Joseph and Asenath. Gundry-Volf concludes by relating Paul's conversion to his view of women and gender. She correctly observes that Paul's views were formed communally with women and men who shared his faith. This is a very timely essay.

The final article is by G. Walter Hansen, entitled "Paul's Conversion and His Ethic of Freedom in Galatians." While failing to mention Martin Luther's *The Freedom of the Christian Man*, Hansen presents four considerations in Pauline ethics: freedom from slavery, freedom through the cross, freedom by the Spirit, and freedom to love. This is one of the finest essays in the book.

This book belongs in research libraries. It should prove beneficial to all serious readers interested in the role of Paul's conversion in various aspects of his life and thought.

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Raymond Chapman, *The Habit of Prayer* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse, 1999), 86 pages. Reviewed by Markus H. McDowell.

The question put to Jesus, "How should we pray?" has been asked repeatedly throughout history. Today, there are countless popular books on the subject of prayer, some of which focus on the theology of prayer, others of which simply model various prayers. Many of these books can be quite helpful; others are not worth the paper they are printed on.

This short book by Raymond Chapman is one of the better examples of prayer collections. It is more than just a collection, however. Unlike *The Oxford Book of Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) or Robert Webber's *Book of Daily Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993)—both worthwhile collections—this book presents an assortment of prayers that should be easy to incorporate into *private* prayer. Some are based upon traditional prayers, but most are the author's own compositions. Although Chapman is an Anglican priest with a "strong preference for the Book of Common Prayer" (p. 2), he felt the need for a book that would help those Christians who "have not developed a practice of systematic prayer" (p. 1), as well as those who desire some guidance and structure in their prayer.

Chapman begins the book with a brief introduction that presents his understanding of the

habit of prayer, the need for some structure in prayer, and a call to be "ambitious but not impatient" (p. 6) in prayer. He also stresses the role of prayer in developing a close relationship with God.

The rest of the book is a collection of prayers organized under a variety of topics and subtopics. The first major topic is "Daily Prayers," where the reader will find prayers under such subtopics as "Morning," "During the Day," and "Evening." The major sections that follow are "Devotions for Holy Communion," "Seasonal Prayers" (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent), "Grace Before Meals," "Meditations" (temptations, penitence, thanksgiving, family problems, anger), "Church Group Prayers" (finance committee, servers, and even church cleaning!), and "Traditional Prayers."

There are no long prayers in the collection; in fact, some are quite short. For example, one of the morning prayers is a simple affirmation:

Oh, my God, I believe that you are present here; I worship and adore you with all my heart. (p. 9)

Other prayers range from a few lines to a few paragraphs. Some are more liturgical than others. Two more examples will suffice: one for a Lord's Supper meditation; the second, a longer prayer for deliverance from temptation. Note the more formal, liturgical aspect of the first prayer and the conversational, less formal aspect of the second prayer.

Merciful God, do not look at my unworthiness, but accept

sorrow for my sins, joy for the love freely given, and thanks for the grace of this holy sacrament.

Through the Body and Blood of my Lord, may I receive new strength for my Christian service. (pp. 19–20)

This is an attractive possibility.

I know it would be wrong, and yet—

There would be no great harm, nobody hurt,

Just a little pleasure, a little advantage.

At least there can be nothing wrong in thinking about it, So long as I don't allow it to go too far.

Yet something will not let me alone

With my pleasant thoughts of what might be:

This distant warning system called my conscience

Tells me to stop here, listen to no evil.

Jesus, cruelly tempted in the wilderness,

Did not listen or stop to consider

But told the tempter to go right away.

Lord, deliver me from evil. (p. 58)

While there are numerous small, or “pocket,” collections of prayers and meditations available today, many are neither theologically sound nor very helpful as models. Fortunately, Chapman

provides one of the better offerings in this area. For the most part, he maintains that difficult balance between simplicity in style and sophistication in theology. For those looking to enrich their prayer lives, this book contains a helpful variety of prayers in a small amount of space. I recommend it.

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Notes continued from “Freedom or Fortune”

⁸ Cited, e.g., in Hays, “Role,” 31. Here Paul departs most radically from his Jewish milieu, which equated God's will with knowing the commandments: “So be wise in the Lord and discerning, knowing the *order* of his commandments, which is ordained for every act” (TNaph 8.10, italics added). When the community at Qumran spoke of God's will, it spoke of returning to every commandment in the law of Moses (see, e.g., 1QS 5.9). Notice how Paul assumes this Torah-based “discernment” (*dokimazo*) of his Jewish interlocutor at Rom 2:18. In light of this pervasive practice, Paul's advocacy of a Torah-less discernment must be seen as nothing less than striking.

⁹ On this point especially, see Robin Scroggs, *Paul for a New Day* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 64.

¹⁰ Dunn judges Paul's reliance on Jesus' tradition here as “very strong” (Dunn, 745).

¹¹ Scroggs, 65. Scroggs points out a number of problems with many so-called allusions, including how one goes about identifying an allusion as such, leading him to conclude that “Paul's ethic is not centrally based on the tradition of Jesus' teaching” (65). For a somewhat different evaluation of the evidence that focuses on the phrase “law of Christ,” see Ben Witherington, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 270.

¹² Fee, 598.

¹³ So, e.g., Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 756 n. 69.

¹⁴ Moo, 758.

¹⁵ As Fee points out, Paul shows the renewed mind at work in the exercise of the community's gifts in 12:3–8 (Fee, 599).

¹⁶ Hays, “Role,” 47.

Notes continued from “Your Sons and Daughters”

²⁶ Wolff, 67.

²⁷ Ward, 243.

²⁸ Freeman Sleeper, “Pentecost and Resurrection,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965): 390.

²⁹ Wolff, 15.

³⁰ Blenkinsopp, 229.

Notes from “Reading Romans Today”

¹ Krister Stendahl, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963); also published in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

² Nils Dahl, “The Missionary Theology in the Epistle to the Romans,” in *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Christian Mission* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 71.