

Paul: A Biography, by Tom Wright. London: SPCK/San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018. xiii + 464 pp. £19.99/\$29.99 (hbk). ISBN 978-0-281-07875-2 (SPCK); 978-0-061-73058-0 (HarperOne).

Professor Wright here steps aside from the hand-to-hand scholarly fighting of his more “academic” writings to lay out the story of Paul’s life. He writes as “Tom” (rather than “N. T.”), signalling (I assume) that this is a mid-level book, accessible to thoughtful readers who may not have formal theological training. In this he succeeds admirably, for he writes beautifully—on page after page I noted fine turns of phrase, metaphors and analogies.

Wright lays the material out as narrative, with the references almost entirely to primary sources, especially Paul’s letter and Acts. Endnotes provide references, and readers are spared the forest of footnotes in contemporary scholarly books on Paul (including Wright’s own).

The book falls into three parts, with the second the longest. A helpful scene-setting introduction includes a semi-autobiographical section on why Paul is important, important historical and cultural issues in studying the first century, and a discussion of the overall story of (Old Testament) Scripture as Saul of Tarsus saw it before the Damascus Road.

Part I “Beginnings” outlines Saul’s upbringing, and key Jewish traditions which shaped him. He notes (ch. 1) in particular Phinehas (Num 25) as someone who showed “zeal” which was “reckoned to him as righteousness” (Ps 106:30-31). Wright connects this with Abraham’s faith-reckoned-as-righteousness (Gen 15:6), and argues that Saul was part of the violent (“zealous”) tendency within Judaism, by contrast with the “live and let live” approach of his teacher, Gamaliel.

The Damascus Road experience is critical (ch. 2). Wright suggests (following John Bowker, whom he does not name here) that Saul was meditating on the chariot/throne vision of Ezekiel 1 as he travelled, and that his shock was to find that the figure in the chariot was Jesus. This was the driver (pun intended) of the “messianic eschatology” which was the centre of Paul’s faith and practice over the following decades.

Wright paints Paul’s movements following that experience (ch. 3), drawing together information from Galatians 1 and Acts (the maps at the beginning of each chapter are very helpful for visualising distances and journeys). Necessarily, here and elsewhere, Wright has to “gap fill,” not least for the silent ten years of AD 36–46, and his suggestions are generally plausible and always clearly explained. I particularly like the closing section chapter 3, considering Paul as a man of prayer, where Wright suggests how Paul’s praying of Scripture changed in the light of his new recognition of Jesus as the exalted Lord.

Paul’s time in Antioch (ch. 4) follows. Wright portrays the multi-cultural nature of the city, and shows what it would look like for Barnabas and Paul’s messianic group to gain purchase in that city. He highlights that this group, crossing boundaries of “culture, gender, and ethnic and social groupings” (p. 91), sets the agenda for Paul’s church-planting and pastoring ministries—through Jesus, God is bringing humanity together as one.

Part II, “Herald of the King,” tells the missionary life of Paul, using Acts in interaction with the letters. Here, I can only identify highlights. Wright sees Galatians as the earliest Pauline letter (a significant, but minority, view, with which I agree), and identifies the crisis in Galatia with the issues leading up to the Jerusalem meeting (Acts 15).

Wright stresses in a number of places (e.g. pp. 110-12) that we must eschew our modern division of “religion” and “politics”, which is anachronistic in the first century—to follow Jesus as Lord was necessarily to make a social and political statement (readers of Wright will recognise his claim that Jesus-followers were necessarily downgrading Caesar’s claims to

universal rule). Thus he sees Paul's choice of cities for church-planting as deliberate, focusing on centres of the imperial cult.

Wright outlines a plausible scenario for writing 2 Corinthians (ch. 12), proposing that Paul writes in fits and starts over a journey from Ephesus to Corinth taking some months. For the longest time, Paul does not know whether his (now lost) previous letter and Titus's visit have produced a change in the Corinthians' negative attitudes, and this explains the defensive nature of much of the letter. When Titus arrives (2 Cor 7:6-7), the tone of the letter changes, and Paul then asks for the Corinthians' participation in the collection (2 Cor 8-9) and is much more upbeat (2 Cor 10-13).

A particular feature is the mini-expositions of the Pauline letters, and these are always fresh, readable and stimulating, inviting readers to read and reflect on the letters themselves (Wright's intention, I'm sure). The reading of Romans is masterful and characteristically Wrightian (pp. 321-37)—his long engagement with Romans, dating back to his Oxford DPhil, shines through.

Wright believes Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus for a period, concerning which neither Acts nor letters are explicit. Wright shows the explanatory power of this hypothesis (ch. 10), and locates the four 'prison letters' (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon) in this period—"Ephesians" (which Wright, with many, thinks is a circular for several churches) is written from Ephesus.

The book closes with a chapter on Paul's journey to Rome (ch. 14) and a reflection on Paul's contribution and achievements (ch. 15). The latter is a brilliant summary and hints at how Christians today might be freshly stimulated by a deep engagement with Paul.

Throughout, Wright takes seriously the whole range of evidence, rejecting writing sources off because they are considered historically unreliable (as some regard Acts) or "deutero-Pauline" (i.e. not written by Paul—notably the Pastoral Letters, Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians). Wright robustly uses most of these as sources of evidence, although he hesitates considerably about 1 Timothy and Titus (pp. 396-97).

Who should read this book? It is accessible enough for a thoughtful church member without theological training to read (it would be great for an adult Sunday school course), although they'd need to be ready for 400+ pages. It would be helpful for a theological student looking for a "bird's eye view" of Paul with lots of helpful insights and details along the way. It would make a great book to use for a Paul class alongside something more traditionally "scholarly" (such as David Horrell's *An Introduction to the Study of Paul*. 3rd ed. London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

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