

BOOK REVIEW

Wright, N.T., *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018). xiv + 464 pp. Hbk. \$29.99.

In regard to the focus of this impressive biography of Paul, N.T. Wright states: ‘We are searching for the man behind the texts’ (p. xi). Sometimes ancient authors are sketchily hidden behind answers to age-old questions regarding what they did, the nature of the literary legacy they left behind and the significance of their corpus. Such an obscure person was the Greek poet Homer, born sometime between the twelfth and eighth centuries BCE. Much is written about Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, including their setting, their poetic features and the manner of their creation, but Homer the man remains as it were, a hand shadow puppet. In Homer’s case the major reason is that few biographical details survive.

More data is available about Moses. We know of his resin-coated basket floating on the Nile, the devoted watch of Miriam, the arrival of Pharaoh’s daughter, the Egyptian court education, his killing of an Egyptian harassing a Hebrew, his fleeing to Midian, his shepherding, his confrontation with God at the burning bush, his speech problem, his meekness, his receiving the law from God face to face, his leadership in forming a nation and his many challenges and failures. Along the way, scholars through the centuries have asked when and where all of these events occurred, and whether we can really be sure they are authentic. Out of these data, Moses emerges as an extraordinarily gifted ancient authority and nation builder, but still he is a nebulous person at best with respect to his inner life.

The inimitable Apostle Paul has suffered much the same fate through the centuries. Scholars have constantly battled over his upbringing and education, his conversion, his views of the Jews, his commitment to the Hebrew Bible, the chronology of his life, his imprisonments, the dates of his letters, the contrasts of the Paul of the letters with Acts, the purpose and content of the Epistles, their literary and rhetorical features, what he meant by ‘righteousness’

and when and where Paul died. Because of these disputes, Paul the man slips into an aggressive but essentially nondescript missionary role, blurred against a plethora of scholarly conundrums. Wright sets out to rescue the Apostle from the miasma of two centuries of subsidiary interests that obscure the real human Paul. In *Paul: A Biography*, Wright helps us come face to face with an alive, zealous, committed, caring, anxiety-filled, successful, stressed-out, joyful narrator of God's promises and actions—a consummate church launcher. After reading Wright's depiction, readers will never again scrutinize Paul's Epistles as simply commonplace compositions of a Messiah-believing Jew.

Wright's biography is focused on Paul from the Damascus road experience, which Wright dates with some uncertainty to 33 CE, to Paul's 62 CE house arrest in Rome. He mentions Paul's Tarsus upbringing and training in Jerusalem but offers few details that throw light on the classical Greek *paideia* or Jewish synagogue regimen which Paul may have experienced. Wright is focused on the adult Paul, his mission and message, his tribulations and victories and his inner reactions to events that transpired. Unlike the recent book by archaeologist William Dever, who set out to reconstruct the history of Israel from artifacts rather than from texts, Wright sets out to locate Paul through examining the texts. Wright ends his work by entertaining the prospect that Paul may have been released from Roman arrest and traveled to Spain, as well as back east where he continued his correspondence by writing the three pastorals, as claimed, for example, by Donald Guthrie. But Wright regards these travels as uncertain and thus devotes little time to Paul's final days.

Wright alludes to most of the ongoing controversies regarding Paul that have engaged scholars through history. Most of these clashes are well-known to dedicated Pauline scholars. However, Wright has produced a book for non-specialists, and he seldom names the protagonists nor provides bibliographies. *Paul: A Biography* has eleven pages of endnotes, but these are almost completely made up of references to biblical texts. For example, Wright alludes to F.C. Baur's famous Hegelian advancement of Jewish Christianity into Gentile Christianity and then the emergence of both into early Catholic Christianity, but he does not name Baur or cite any of his publications. Wright also mentions Luther's interpretation of justification by faith, as well as the 'New Perspective on Paul' promoted by E.P. Sanders and others, without names or bibliography.

For Wright, Paul's Damascus road experience is best viewed from an Old Testament perspective. Up to that time, Paul considered zeal for the ways of the fathers to be his mission in life as characterized by Elijah and Phineas. He anticipated, much like Ezekiel, a magnificent restoration, a new exodus and a new temple. Paul's vision on the way to Damascus can therefore be compared with Ezekiel's. The new Ezekiel temple, which was revealed on the road to Paul's wonderment, was Jesus, the anticipated Messiah. God made a series of promises to Abraham, Moses, David and others. He fulfilled his promises in person—that is, in his Son, the Lord Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus pointed ahead to the new heaven and the new earth. All persons, both Jews and Gentiles became the new community of God, convened in local conclaves by Paul. In order to carry out his commission, Paul received Jesus' own Spirit. After the vision on the road, much like Elijah, he headed to Mt Sinai in Arabia, then returned to Damascus to announce a new king—the Messiah, the world's rightful sovereign. He took on the role of Isaiah's suffering servant—a new commission, one wherein he exhibited the zeal of the fathers for the newly inaugurated earth and heaven.

Paul did not envision founding a new religion—Christianity. He now reasigned his earlier zeal to teaching the ways of the fathers as fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. Faith (*pistis*) for Paul meant loyalty—that is, faithfulness. He held the Old Testament charge that good deeds are the manifestation of loyalty. Paul was a Jew who believed that God's Messiah died on a cross in Jerusalem and rose from the grave to herald the eventual melding of heaven and earth into one—a cosmic renewal. Paul, contrary to twentieth-century popular evangelism, did not see his mission as proclaiming that Jesus will help people go to heaven when they die. He believed that on the cross, Jesus of Nazareth defeated the ultimate forces of evil, with the result that all humans, not just the Jews, are free to worship one God. The wall between Jews and Gentiles was breached. The new way was launched through healing and the suffering service of those loyal to the Messiah. The resurrection of the Messiah brought about a whole new world—a new humanity. The new communities of faith were loyal to king Jesus, not to the Caesars.

A second critical epoch for Paul, according to Wright, was his first mission journey into what Wright designates, along with Paul's other forays, 'Caesar's heartland' (p. 111). The reason for Paul's selection of the specific cities was their dedication to Caesar. Wright declares that the cities mentioned in Acts were in southern Galatia, and, therefore, Galatians is the earliest of Paul's Epistles. While major British scholars have embraced the southern

Galatia hypothesis, most German and many American scholars have rejected it, believing that the cities addressed are in the north. They contend that 1 Thessalonians is the earliest of Paul's letters. Paul's telling point was that there is one Lord, and it is not Caesar. In writing to the Galatians, according to Wright, Paul made it abundantly clear that being in the covenant community of God was grounded irrevocably in the faithfulness of Jesus, not in the edicts of the Jewish law. Paul believed that Jesus was utterly faithful to the divine purpose. Wright translates Gal. 2.16 as follows:

That is why we believed in the Messiah, Jesus: so that we might be declared "righteous" on the basis of the Messiah's faithfulness, and not on the basis of works of the Jewish law. On that basis, you see, no creature will be declared "righteous" (p. 148).

Wright shows that according to Paul, God was faithful to his age-old promises fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. Jesus was faithful in obedience, even unto death on the cross (Phil. 2.8). The believer in the Messiah is judged righteous if faithful, loyally producing Christ-ordained good deeds through God's grace. Wright charges that it is a mistake to read Galatians as if it is a critique of Pelagianism, that is, generic works salvation. The latter viewpoint is often proclaimed in evangelical assemblies. Justification through faithfulness is a constant dictum in Paul's discourse. Wright concludes that what made Paul what he was is best expressed in 1 Cor. 8.6, which according to Wright's translation reads as follows:

For us there is one God, the father,
From whom are all things, and we live to him and for him;
And on Lord, Jesus the Messiah,
Through whom are all things, and we live through him (p. 252).

Wright designates this statement as Paul's new version of the *Shema* (Deut. 6.4-9).

Wright develops situations and details throughout the volume that disclose dynamic features of Paul the man and illustrate his life in bold relief. In this review, I will feature some of the accounts which made a deep impression on me.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul confided that it was 'through bodily weakness that I announced the gospel to you in the first place' (Gal. 4.13, Wright's translation) (p. 123). I have tended, with many others, to think that Paul was referring to some eye problem. Wright thinks, and convinced me,

that Paul here made reference to the violence to which he had been subjected. Wright highlights the bodily injury Paul and Barnabas suffered in Iconium by both Jews and Gentiles, and that in Lystra Paul was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14.19). Paul accepted the fact that the inbreaking of the new world was such a disruption of the old that violent repercussions would ensue. The next persons who gazed at Paul came face to face with a man who had recently walked away from a stoning. He appeared bruised and scratched, perhaps dotted with facial patches. He was scarcely presentable to a group gathered in an ancient domicile eager to hear his controversial message. Nevertheless, they accepted him as if he were an angel or even the Messiah himself. A negative reaction to injured faces often happens to us today as well.

Wright depicts a vibrant Paul on the Areopagus. Paul was not there for a ponderous philosophical dialogue. He was on trial for his assertions regarding the God who appeared to Abraham, Moses and Solomon. His situation was perilous; he faced a major challenge with a nerve-wracking battle on the outside and fears on the inside. Even in tolerant Athens, persons with nonconforming worldviews were put on trial, such as Socrates. Though both Epicureanism and Stoicism had adherents in the city, according to Wright, Stoicism prevailed. The adherents of neither philosophy believed in the one God, but Paul noted fissures in their claims that pointed away from polytheism. The Epicureans heralded deities unconcerned with human welfare, and the Stoics were pantheists—that is, God and the world is more or less the same.

Paul spoke about Jesus and the resurrection which his judges mistakenly perceived as two deities—that is, Jesus and his consort, Anastasis ('Resurrection'). In this context, Paul declared that what he taught might sound new, but the 'One God' who subdued all the powers through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was hidden in the jumbled underbrush of their own culture. They themselves exhibited tendencies of turning from idols so as to embrace the living God. This one God created all peoples and allotted them their time and place. This God is the Jewish God who provided a far more consistent view of reality than the gods of Greece and Rome. Despite the weightiness of contemporary empire entities, the God who is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ will be the final judge. The Athenians may hold their court on the Areopagus, the nations may strut their stuff (Paul drawing on Ps. 2), but God will laugh and placard his true Son. Paul's basic outlook is Jewish. He draws on tell-tale signs in Athenian literature that hint of the one God. Jesus and his resurrection are indeed new! Paul convinced few, but he was acquitted. He walked away a free man.

Wright's detailed reflections on a hypothesized Ephesian imprisonment disclose a major means by which Paul emerged from the shadows. These observations are substantial because it was while in prison in Ephesus rather than from Rome, according to Wright, that Paul wrote the Prison Epistles: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon and Ephesians. Wright tentatively dates these letters to 55–56 CE. As evidence for the Ephesian imprisonment, Wright cites 2 Corinthians regarding Paul's 'suffering in Asia': 'The load we had to carry was far too heavy for us, it got to the point where we gave up on life itself. Yes: deep inside ourselves we received the sentence of death' (2 Cor. 1.8-9, Wright's translation) (p. 236). It is only after the ordeal is lifted that Paul can say, 'We are under all kinds of pressure, but we are not crushed completely; we are at a loss, but not at our wits' end; we are persecuted, but not abandoned; we are cast down, but not destroyed' (2 Cor. 4.8-9, Wright's translation) (p. 237). The outcome is that following this catastrophe Paul's letter writing is different, which explains the discrepancy scholars have found between 1 and 2 Corinthians and also Colossians and Ephesians.

According to Wright, when Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus it was after he had faced down the enraged mob that accused him of desecrating the worship of the local goddess Artemis. Furthermore, they charged that Paul had decimated the silver image industry that was an important sector of the Ephesian economy. The furor of the violent mob landed Paul in an Ephesian jail. At the same time, he was in a depressing correspondence with the believers in Corinth who were consumed by an acrimonious dispute over whether Paul, Peter or Apollos should be their hero. Then there was the problem of the member living with his father's wife. Paul found conflict on every side. His despair was overwhelming. Wright goes on to show in detail how in the Prison Epistles, Paul divulged the struggles he experienced.

Wright argues that Philippians is the first of the Prison Epistles and that the outcome of his Ephesian trial is still uncertain. Paul himself shared the Messiah's suffering; he encouraged the Philippians to do likewise. He admonished the Philippians to embrace the mind of the Messiah in humble obedience, even obedience 'unto death' (Phil. 2.8). Paul learned that the power of the gospel rested utterly with God, not with rhetorical flourish. According to Wright, Paul probably feared that the pro-circumcision proponents might arrive in Philippi from Galatia and unsettle the unity of the believers. Paul had learned through his Ephesian experience that a commitment to the Messiah might entail a shameful death, that he himself had suffered the loss of all things and that through suffering he shared the mission of the Messiah.

Wright discusses the Pauline authorship of Colossians and Ephesians. He points out that these two letters were rejected by nineteenth-century liberal Protestant scholars on the ground that they expressed a 'high' view of the church as compared to the letters to the Galatians, Romans and Corinthians. Wright argues that Colossians and Ephesians are Pauline because they set forth his basic message, and that Paul, as do others, varied in style from document to document. He contends that Colossians and Ephesians are rooted in ancient Jewish worldviews and refashioned by the death and resurrection of Jesus with the destruction of pagan power being the result. He also proposed that Paul may have been adapting to the 'Asiatic' style of Asia Minor.

Wright gives special attention to Paul as a praying mentor and depicts him as encouraging a young church at Colossae to concentrate on giving thanks. He emphasizes Paul's explanation that God in Christ made the whole of reality through wisdom and quotes Col. 1.15-20. Paul set forth a world that was a Jewish world. The Colossians had, from that foundation, been transformed into the image of the dying and risen Jesus. Wright declares that the centrality of the risen Lord and the living church, due to Paul's appalling circumstances, created a differently focused message than that in Galatians and Romans. In the Ephesian letter, Paul addressed the churches in the province of Asia. He emphasized a cosmic and global vision of God's purpose and the manner in which the church is endemic in that plan. The temple now consisted of the Jesus followers and is the place where the living God dwells. The first part of the letter is about power and the unity of Jews and Gentiles, and the second is by intent practical. Wright ends his treatment of Ephesians by emphasizing the battle mentality with which Paul urged believers to engage the world, just as Paul had waged war upon dark forces that powerfully confronted him in the time of the Ephesian imprisonment (Eph. 6.10-20). Paul learned the hard way that the evil powers of the universe strike back.

Wright obviously has foraged widely into the two thousand years of discourse about the Apostle Paul. He has thought deeply about who Paul was and what he stood for. In *Paul: A Biography*, Wright has elevated a behind-the-scenes author into a vibrant, committed, self-examining, aggressive disciple of Jesus the Messiah. I have been deeply influenced by Wright's vivid depiction of this early Christian leader. It has given me much to think about and contributed immeasurably to my own devotional life. Every believer should read this powerful work. In this book, Wright provided even more insights than I am able to cover in this review. Readers need not agree with all of Wright's observations in order to benefit from his impressive reflections.

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