Book Review:

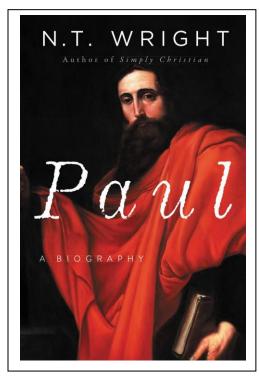
Paul: A Biography

By N.T. Wright

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pages

T.T. Wright is a prolific writer who has produced a number of books on the apostle Paul, including *The Climax of the Covenant* (1991/1992), *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (2013), and *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (2015). In addition to these, he has also written a commentary series on the New Testament, which gave him ample opportunity to discuss Paul's letters as well as his life. In the preface to this latest book, *Paul: A Biography*, Wright observes that the genre of biography allows him to ask different questions about Paul and that in



biography "we are searching for the man behind the texts." Still, giving Wright every benefit of the doubt, it seems unlikely to me that he is breaking much new ground in his latest effort. Nevertheless, I thoroughly enjoyed this book and highly recommend it as a general introduction to Paul as well as to Wright's thought.

With the exception of Jesus, there is no one whose life is presented in greater detail in the New Testament than the apostle Paul. This is due not only to Luke's treatment of Paul in the book of Acts but also to the thirteen letters written by Paul in the New Testament, which, Wright informs the reader, come to a little less than eighty pages in standard modern translations. This is significantly less, Wright explains, "than almost any single one of Plato's dialogues or Aristotle's treatises," yet it is certain that this small body of work has "generated more comment, more sermons and seminars, more monographs and dissertations than any other writings from the ancient world."

Wright asks two big questions about Paul. First, how is it that this first-century Jewish writer came to be so important in the world of ideas and religion? And, second, what was the nature of Paul's "conversion" on the Damascus road and how did it effect his later ministry? These questions give Wright an opportunity to explore Paul's life, offering speculation where facts are thin but staying well within the boundaries of what the historical context will reasonably allow.

Wright begins by arguing that Paul was a Pharisee whose defining characteristic was "zeal," comparing him to the Old Testament figure Phinehas, who threw a spear at an errant Israelite man and a Moabite girl, killing them both. This made Phinehas a hero whose zeal was commended by God and recognized as "righteousness." In the same way, Abraham's zeal as demonstrated in his willingness to slaughter his son Isaac was "reckoned ... as righteousness" as was Elijah's zeal in slaughtering the priests of Baal and Judas Maccabaeus' zeal in leading a revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes. Paul, however, took this traditional zeal towards the God of

the Old Testament and redirected it towards Jesus as messiah and the "good news" of the kingdom that he proclaimed.

Having discovered a new object for his zeal, Paul's life as a persecutor ended, and his life as an object of persecution began. As a leader in the Messiah movement, he was attacked by Jews as a traitor and by pagans as an insurgent. Though he was clearly an opponent of pagan religion, it was never his intention to repudiate "Judaism" or create a new religion called "Christianity." Paul, who always considered himself a Jew, saw Christ as the fulfillment of Israel's hopes. The process of reinterpreting traditional Judaism in the light of the life of Jesus took time, which Wright suggests took place largely over the three-year period that Paul spent in Arabia after his Damascus road experience.

Though Paul had studied Judaism as a Pharisee in Jerusalem, becoming one of the great Jewish scholars of his time, he was also comfortable with contemporary Greek philosophy. He was familiar, Wright explains, with Stoicism and Epicureanism, the two chief philosophical systems of the time. And he could quote the philosophers of these systems. Wright says that he recognized their flaws, but he also observed that they "could and did aspire to live wisely and well." In Philippi, he called on the church to consider "whatever is true, whatever is holy, whatever is upright," and so forth. Paul, Wright seems to be saying, was not a narrowly educated religious bigot. Rather, he was just the opposite.

Wright the biographer considers such things as whether Paul was ever married, an expectation of all orthodox Jews at the time. He considers four options: he was never married; he was married but his wife died early; his wife broke off the marriage when Paul returned from Damascus with a radical new religious commitment; or—Wright's favorite—when Paul returned to Tarsus as a newly committed Christian, his fiancée or her parents ended the engagement. All of this, of course, is speculation, but I appreciate Wright's laying out of the various possibilities.

Wright is careful to provide geographical and cultural background so that readers will understand Paul's travels. He also describes the politics in the church—he dominance of the "pillars" in Jerusalem, and the division between Jewish and Gentile Christians—and is careful to describe the cultural and political context in the Roman cities that Paul visits. For example, he writes to correct a common misperception about Acts 17, arguing that "the Areopagus ... was not a philosophers' debating society" but a court in which Paul was on trial (Acts 17). Wright also notes his personal relationships such as those he had with Barnabas, Peter, John Mark, Timothy, and others. Perhaps most important for students of the Bible, Wright carefully explains each of the main Pauline letters, noting their message as well as the personal, political, and religious contexts from which they emerged.

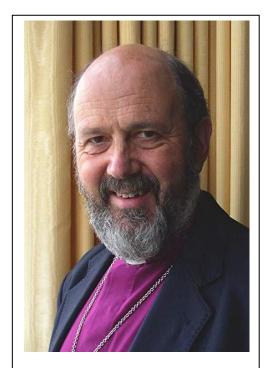
Wright also deals with questions of authorship. Did Paul really write all those letters or where some written by others? In general, he says, yes, he was the author of the letters attributed to him, observing that differences in style in the various letters should be expected given the different settings and times in which Paul wrote. Also, he observes, scholarly fashions, such as nineteenth-century German liberal Protestantism, come and go. Hence in the past century, the Pauline authorship of some letters was rejected, but today these same letters are generally accepted. Though many scholars would disagree with him, Wright argues that Paul wrote both Ephesians and Colossians, but he is not as confident about the pastoral letters: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.

As is common in Wright's books, he makes the point that simply "going to heaven" is not the heart of the gospel. For him, this is a medieval distortion of Jesus' message of the kingdom, one that shifts attention from earth to heaven and hell. The gospel was also not written to answer Martin Luther's question: "How can I find a gracious God?" An answer to this question can be found in Paul's writings, but if this is all we are seeking, we will miss the point. For Paul, as Wright describes him, the gospel offers liberation to human beings seeking to participate in God's "rescue operation" for the entire planet. For Wright, the good news includes personal salvation but also much more: the restoration of a creation groaning for renewal, the marriage of heaven and earth in the age to come, and the "colonizing" of earth by heaven. Jesus launched this kingdom project during his lifetime, but it will not be fully realized until the age to come. Paul fully embraced the individual-communal and present-future aspects of Jesus' teachings. Though Christians have often emphasized the individual and future features of the kingdom, Paul believed that, as Wright explains, the kingdom of God "had to do with the foundation of a new *polis*, a new city or community, right at the heart of the existing system."

For Paul, this was a practical matter that concerned building new communities, but it was also a spiritual matter that concerned overcoming the power of darkness. This was perhaps never more true than in Ephesus, where Paul seemed to confront "human authorities [that were] acting merely as a front for other powers that would attack through them." Faced with this dark spiritual reality, Wright comments, "He sensed it, he smelled it, the whiff of sulfur surrounding the hard faces of the magistrates, the diabolical glee of the guards entrusted with whipping or beating their new prisoner, perhaps even the smug faces of people he had thought might be friends but turned out to be enemies."

Wright is also concerned with language. The Roman emperors of Paul's time used Greek words like euangelia (good news), Kyrios (Lord), and Soter (Savior) to refer to the emperor and his reign. Paul used these same words, contrasting and opposing the lordship, good news, and salvation offered by Jesus to that asserted in the political realm by Caesar. Paul's message, in contrast to "the smoke and mirrors of imperial rhetoric," presented the reality of new communities rooted in morality and love that offered spiritual equality, elevated women, and called implicitly for moral reform—reform that would come later in the form of hospitals, education, and care for the poor. In the context of the Roman Empire, Paul's message of good news must be seen as deeply subversive.

Paul, who clearly enjoyed language, could write poetry, adopt Hebrew prayers and language for Christian use, and employ rhetorical effects to make subtle points. Wright notes that in First Corinthians Paul claims to be presenting a message in simple



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language while, ironically and no doubt with a wry smile, using "clever rhetoric" to make his point (1 Cor. 1: 22-25). Paul's description in Second Corinthians 11: 23-33 of his ordeals as an

apostle is a parody of the Roman *cursus honorum* (course of honors). Wright considers this to be "one of the finest and indeed funniest flights of rhetoric anywhere in the New Testament" as it turns the *cursus honorum* into a *cursus pudorum* (a course of shame) (2 Cor. 11: 23-33).

It is generally believed that Paul was originally known by his Hebrew name, Saul, and that in the Greco-Roman context he changed it to Paul in order to fit in. Wright, however, offers another reason. He notes that in Aristophanes' writings *saulos* is "an adjective meaning 'mincing,' as of a man walking in an exaggerated effeminate fashion," which suggests that Paul also changed his name in order to avoid inevitable gibes.

Though a careful scholar, Wright's own language is down to earth and often colloquial. Explaining why Paul was so harsh and direct in confronting Peter regarding his change of policy over relating to Gentiles in Antioch (Gal. 2:11, 14), Wright says: "if you see a friend about to step out unawares, into the path of oncoming traffic, leading a group with him, the most loving thing to do is to yell that they must stop at once. That is exactly what Paul did."

Wright's translations are sometimes folksy but always to the point. Here are a few examples. Luke uses the word *paroxysmos* to describe the falling out between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark, which Wright translates to mean "a blazing, horrible, bitter row." Describing Paul's performance on the Areopagus, Wright explains that Paul was "a Sherlock Holmes figure, explaining to the puzzled police chiefs that their different theories about the crime all have some sense to them, but that there is a different overall framework, under their noses all the time but never observed, that will solve the whole thing." And he describes the present and not-yet aspects of the kingdom as "a form of theological jet lag." Christians, he explains, are simultaneously living in a dark world but also in a time zone in which the sun has already risen.

Wright deeply admires Paul on many levels but especially as a systematic and practical theologian. This can certainly be seen in his letters to the Romans, Corinthians and Ephesians; and he says of Romans 8 that it "is the richest, deepest, and most powerfully sustained climax anywhere in the literature of the early Christian movement, and perhaps anywhere else as well." Wright also admires Paul as a man of tremendous courage, facing, for example, beatings in Jewish synagogues that he might easily have avoided.

Yet Wright does not write hagiography. For him, Paul is no plaster saint. Wright observes that Paul could make hasty decisions, act in hot temper, appear "bossy," and be "tactless." Today, he writes, we might refer to him as a "high maintenance" friend. Though he admires the language and rhetoric of First Corinthians, he admits that Paul's second letter to the Corinthians "ties itself in knots," and when Paul needs to speak about fundraising, an uncomfortable subject for him, he uses "labored and tortured Greek."

Nevertheless, he concludes that Paul was "one of the most successful public intellectuals of all time," which he attributes to Paul's energy, confrontational style, and multifaceted letters. Most important for preserving his cause for posterity is that Paul was a letter-writer for all seasons. He was a "young reformer" in Galatians, attacking the heretics; he was a beleaguered pastor in Second Corinthians, confronting the complexities of inter-human relationships; and he was a theologian *par excellence* in Romans, setting forth the gospel in all its complexity and power in such a way that it would continue to inspire new movements in the church even as late as the twentieth century.

Though Wright is particularly interested in Paul as a theologian, he admits that the gospel was spread by "local communities that were living out the gospel imperatives." Yet he is quick to add that the church's thinkers are also crucial to its success. "Theology," he writes, "is the backbone of a healthy church." In the generation following Jesus' resurrection, Paul helped to supply that backbone, and every subsequent generation would look back to him for inspiration and guidance. "His towering intellectual achievement, a theological vision of the One God reshaped around Jesus and the spirit and taking on the wider world of philosophy, would provide the robust, necessary framework for it all."

Wright has the rare gift of being able to explain complex ideas and historical situations in simple but moving language. When evidence is lacking, he does not shrink from speculating or offering multiple interpretations and then suggesting a best option. Since Wright is transparent about his choices and the reasons for them, the reader never feels manipulated. On the contrary, Wright comes across as an honest tour guide of the early Christian world, one full of good common sense, curious facts, and telling details. The result is a portrait of the apostle Paul that is informative, inspiring, and highly readable.

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