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978-0-521-76764-4 - Paul the Apostle: His Life and Legacy in their Roman Context

J. Albert Harrill

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Socrates, Alexander the Great, Cleopatra, Augustus – no one would deny that these are key figures of classical antiquity. But does Saint Paul belong in this company? This book shows that Paul may not have been famous during his lifetime, but that Roman culture shaped his writings and, in the centuries following his death, he was just as transformative as Alexander. Situating Paul in his ancient Roman context finds continuity between the Jewish “Saul” and the Christian “Paul.” Rather than providing a traditional biography of the West’s prototypical religious convert, this book reassesses the apostle’s life by focusing on his particularly Roman discourse of authority, which provoked the challenge of rivals. Included here as part of the figure’s “life story” are the often hilarious legends that remade the figure into many different Pauls. In the thinking and sensibilities of his later interpreters, Paul became the imperial hero, the sexual role model, and the object of derision, as well as a book to quote from. Paul is, therefore, a key figure of classical antiquity because of the legend he became in the eyes of his later interpreters.

This book thus covers Paul’s life and his legend (literary afterlife). I start with a survey of the available primary sources, an introduction to what counts as historical evidence. Important to understand will be the commonplace usage of a pseudonym in ancient writing, which will show that not every work bearing Paul’s name is authentic. After this introduction, the procedure is first to situate Paul’s life in its ancient context (Chapters 1–3), then to trace the development of his legacy ultimately to the prototypical religious convert and the alleged discoverer of a human being’s introspective conscience (Chapters 4–6).

Understanding that Paul’s multiple identities have changed over time makes intelligible why he has alternatively attracted and repelled readers, both ancient and modern. This problem brings me to make a number of

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methodological points on the important differences between this book and traditional biographies of Paul that are available elsewhere.

1. THIS BOOK IS NOT A TRADITIONAL BIOGRAPHY

The current popularity of biography among general readers suggests that it is ideal for bridging the unfortunate divide between professional historians and nonacademic audiences. In particular, “unauthorized” biographies, written without the endorsement of the subject, allegedly dig up the glamorous dirt and tell the “real” (untold) story of their famous figures. My account of Paul is unquestionably unauthorized, for it appears without an endorsement of church authorities and without a Christian faith that takes the Bible’s authority for granted. The academic standards of professional history and its competing interpretations about the past dictate the need for an independent judgment about Paul that is skeptical of any assertion of divinely revealed knowledge and of absolute certainty.

Yet the project of traditional biography brings with it contradictory assumptions. On the one hand, in popular imagination, a biographer is supposed to be objective and so document the coherent unity, striking personality, and expressive selfhood of the subject. Transparent language ought to unveil the “real” meaning of a subject’s life, which is already present in the sources, rather than to create new meanings. The assumption is that a biographer can know another person’s “essential” (authentic) self, even if the subject (like the apostle Paul) is long dead. For example, concerning his massive biography of the nineteenth-century writer Gustave Flaubert (*The Family Idiot*), Jean-Paul Sartre tells us confidently that he knows his subject completely and perfectly enough to be certain that Flaubert would be a boring dinner companion, if the counterfactual prospect ever were to arise (Sartre 1977, 119, 123). Biographical knowledge is thus believed to be so powerful as to predict “real” and “live” social interaction with a deceased subject. On the other hand, biography is supposed to tell a story in which the character comes alive, as in the psychologically penetrating “realism” of a novel by Jane Austen, William Makepeace Thackeray, or George Eliot. To perform this literary miracle of incarnation, traditional biographers often draw on novelistic techniques of literary fiction such as scene painting, foreshadowing, juxtaposition, and even dialogue. In the contradictory strains of the genre’s assumptions, traditional biography is at once supposed to be truth and story, objective documentary and creative writing.

Let me say up front that I shall not attempt to meet such expectations. I agree with current research in literary theory that challenges the

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previous confidence in traditional biography to recover and reenact a self. Many contemporary circles of academics, including historians like me, thus question earlier beliefs in the transparency of language, the possibility of objectivity, the explanatory power of narrative, and the self as a unified and knowable subject. Moreover, to use nineteenth-century Victorian novels as a model for biography is bad methodology. Their scene-painting techniques and psychoanalysis of the self may create the impression of realism, but they imagine an ancient subject like Paul to be too *modern*.

To write a biography of Paul is, therefore, a perilous undertaking. There simply are not sufficient sources and requisite evidence to write one. Given this predicament, a traditional biographer might aim to enlarge the range of evidence. I, however, will *reduce* the available evidence to a small archive of primary sources (Paul's undisputed letters). I refuse to combine all the available sources into a single synthesis. Readers, therefore, should not expect a composite ("whole") picture of Paul as if one could harmonize all the available sources, biblical and nonbiblical. Such a project would produce a hagiography. Any biographical project necessarily makes judgment calls over what to include and what to exclude, in order to offer reasoned conclusions about the subject. My biography presents a crucial but often overlooked facet of Paul – his *Roman* identification, which, in turn, brings with it a continuity between the Jewish "Saul" and the Christian "Paul." Furthermore, I include the diverse legends in which later interpreters have sought to represent the figure from antiquity to modernity, which stretches the bounds of traditional biography beyond the subject's death.

This book offers one historian's solution to reconcile the tension of these contradictory assumptions by taking up the unconventional and revisionist form of *antibiography*. In contrast to a traditional biography, an antibiography abandons the traditional quest for the essential self (a fixed identity) in a linear chronology (the typical chapter-by-chapter march from birth to death), in favor of decentering the subject into multiple selves and developing more open-ending narrative structures. Consequently, I offer many different Pauls rather than "the" Paul.

In this regard, I shall have occasion to discuss what is called the *historical Paul*, which should not be confused with the "real" Paul who lived in the past. History is not the same thing as the past. It is the reconstruction of the past from careful investigation of and debate over the surviving evidence. Despite a popular misuse of the term in science fiction, *history* is not a place one might go someday (that would be the *past*); one can only *do* (or read) history. The historical Paul thus stands as a modern, debated construct of biblical experts. What constitutes the facts about the apostle in contemporary scholarship is in many instances an open question. This book,

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accordingly, addresses how historical *facts* about Paul come to be. This leads to a second way that my book differs from many other books on Paul.

2. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PRIMARY SOURCES AND SECONDARY SOURCES

What we know about Paul begins in the primary sources. What are primary sources? They are remnants from the past, also known as evidence – anything that survives archaeologically, such as a coin, a writing, a painting, a posthole, a skeleton, a box of tools. I proceed on a fundamental principle uniting all historians, namely, the distinction between primary and secondary sources. What are secondary sources? They are interpretations of the past that modern scholars produce on the basis of their analysis of the remnants we call primary sources. Examples include academic books, such as the one you are reading now, articles in scholarly journals, school textbooks, and documentary television series. Debates and disagreements occur in secondary sources in large part because the primary evidence is often fragmentary and otherwise difficult to interpret. Because historians can only be as good as their sources, the first task in any historical inquiry is to determine the nature of the available primary source material. For Paul, the problem is formidable.

To be sure, listing all the ancient evidence for Paul – the extant writings bearing his name and the other ancient works containing Pauline traditions (see Appendixes 1 and 3) – brings together an impressive number of sources. We seem to have a lot more evidence for Paul than for many other figures in classical antiquity. But the historical value of this material varies significantly. Paul clearly did not write all the writings attributed to him. For example, *The Correspondence of Paul and Seneca* (ca. fourth century) is an obvious ancient forgery, in Latin no less, which imagined Paul to have converted Seneca (the Roman philosopher and tutor of the emperor Nero) to Christianity. Much of the so-called Pauline writings and traditions turn out, in fact, to be legends born of a period after Paul, reinventing him as a larger-than-life figure more useful to later Christian theologies. These diverse and numerous legends include accounts of Paul's martyrdom in Rome, sermons attributed to Peter that condemn Paul as "Satan's apostle," new Pauline letters to additional churches and individuals, his various tours of heaven and hell, and other apostolic adventures with women and lions, all of which have virtually no historical value for reconstructing the life and thought of Paul. Therefore, we need to apply an important rule of thumb to guide our handling of the sources, so as

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not to misuse them. Not all primary sources are created equal. Some are original works directly from the man himself; others come only second-hand and are derivative, written decades and even centuries after Paul. Therefore, our fundamental principle of historical inquiry that separates the primary from the secondary applies also to the ancient evidence itself. That is, some ancient works that appear to provide primary evidence for Paul are actually secondary sources.

Given this rule of thumb, a typical proposal is to limit our acceptable primary sources to those appearing in New Testament. For this plan, we might turn first to the canonical Acts of the Apostles, an extended narrative of the early church that includes Paul's conversion and missionary career. We might then "fill in" material from the letters bearing Paul's name, which in canonical order are Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. The Epistle to the Hebrews, though often attributed to Paul in church tradition, does not bear his name. Although this proposal has the advantage of including the earliest sources on Paul, it would also be inadequate because modern critical scholars dispute the historical reliability of the book of Acts and whether Paul wrote all the letters attributed to him in the New Testament.

Modern critical scholars conclude that nearly half of the New Testament letters that claim to be from Paul are in fact pseudonymous – that is, written by someone else under his name. Six of the canonical epistles bearing Paul's name have important differences from the other seven – in style, vocabulary, theology, and view of church institutionalization – which have sparked valuable debates about their genuineness since the nineteenth century. For example, a consensus of academic biblical scholarship holds that Paul did not write 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus (ca. 95–125), the discrete corpus known as the Pastoral Epistles; those works assume developed institutions of church hierarchy that did not exist in Paul's day (see Chapter 4). Similar reasons persuade a vast majority of critical scholars that Paul did not write Ephesians. The question of whether Paul wrote Colossians and 2 Thessalonians divides critical scholars: a few affirm that Paul wrote both, some that he wrote only one (usually 2 Thessalonians), and most others that both are pseudonymous. The case of 2 Thessalonians is particularly interesting because, either way scholars come down on its authorship, the letter still shows that the circulation of fake Pauline letters concerned early Christian congregations (see Box 1).

It is no surprise that early Christians forged letters in Paul's name. Pseudonymous works of teachers and other figures commonly circulated in the ancient Mediterranean world, a practice that modern scholars

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Box 1 The Earliest Known Warning about Fake Pauline Letters

The writing in the New Testament known as 2 Thessalonians warns its readers that fake Pauline letters may be circulating in the local congregation. In an irony of history, many modern scholars conclude that 2 Thessalonians itself is pseudonymous – that is, falsely bearing Paul’s name. We thus likely have a fake Pauline letter protesting the spread of fake Pauline letters! Such letters ventriloquized Paul *as if* written by him.

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word *or by letter, as though from us*, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. (2 Thess. 2:1–2; emphasis added)

soft-pedal by preferring to call it *pseudepigraphy* (“false writing”) rather than forgery. In the case of Paul, following ancient custom, he likely made copies of his letters, as did the communities that received them. Later churches then edited partial collections into a corpus. The editing and copying process of textual transmission by hand – long before the invention of movable type and the printing press in the fifteenth century – encouraged scribes to interpolate the text (to alter or add words and lines). The copies were then exchanged with other congregations, as the Epistle to the Colossians (late first century) attests: “And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea” (Col. 4:16). Such a letter to believers in the Asia Minor city of Laodicea-Lycus does not exist – it is doubtful that Paul ever wrote one, given the likelihood that Colossians itself is pseudonymous – but the reference encouraged the forgery of at least two replacements in late antiquity. The one that survives today (ca. second to fourth century, see Appendix 1) is a banal pastiche written to be the “real” Letter to the Laodiceans possibly in opposition to an even earlier forgery, and is complete with a sister reference to Colossians 4:16: “And see that (this epistle) is read to the Colossians and that of the Colossians to you” (*Letter to the Laodiceans* 20).

Such forgeries were almost always condemned in antiquity. Ancient education inadvertently enabled it, however. For example, students in Greco-Roman schools (Greek *gymnasia*) commonly had to compose a speech or letter imitating the text of a famous past figure – what Socrates or

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Cleopatra would have typically said in a stock situation, for example – a set rhetorical exercise known as *declamation* (speech in character). The skills learned in declamation thus made it possible for forgers to have a good sense about how to proceed. But there was nothing in the ancient curriculum that encouraged anyone to publish one's own writing in the name of another. Quite the contrary, using imitative skills in this way was actively discouraged in the environment of ancient literary culture. When such activities were detected, the products were condemned as “lies” and “bastards,” and never sanctioned. Nonetheless, many works passed, unbeknownst to ancient readers, as the authentic writing of a famous figure. Examples include the pseudonymous dialogues of Plato, the spurious works of Aristotle, and mathematical theorems attributed to Pythagoras. In this regard, ancient Jews shared those cultural habits of their “pagan” neighbors. Diverse Jewish pseudonymous writings bearing false ascriptions to biblical and other prophetic authorities from Israel's past date from the Hellenistic and Roman periods – the so-called Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.

Why was all this literature produced? A major reason was to gain an audience for the writing. The *wisdom* bearing the name “King Solomon” would command notice and an immediate readership, for example. The widespread practice of authors lying about their identities in order to lend authority to their own views makes intelligible the pseudonymous authorship of Pauline letters. Later Christian authors wanted apostolic authority for their views. Lacking such authority themselves, they created it by forging Paul.

Acts of the Apostles: A Secondary Source for the Historical Paul

The historical problems of the Acts of the Apostles reduce the number of sources confidently going back to Paul even further. Although using Acts as a primary source for Paul may seem understandable, given the importance of Paul as a major character in the book and its coherence as a narrative, it is highly misleading in reconstructing a context for the historical figure. Acts is not a “history” in the modern meaning of the term. Rather, its theological narrative shares affinities with Greco-Roman popular literature. Acts presents Paul schematically, as the greatest hero of a “unified” Church who brings the gospel from its origins in Jerusalem to the imperial capital of Rome, with powerful orations, great miracles, and dramatic travels as God's “chosen instrument” of salvation (Acts 9:15). Modern

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Box 2 Comparing Acts and Galatians: Paul’s First Jerusalem Visit as an Apostle

Acts	Galatians
When he [Paul] had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. (Acts 9:26–30)	Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas [Peter] and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord’s brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went to the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.” And they glorified God because of me. (Gal. 1:18–24)

critical scholars have found many stories in Acts to be concocted out of the author’s theological themes or otherwise adapted from prior sources and existing legends. Accepting the book of Acts literally as straightforward and unproblematic evidence of Paul’s life is naive. Historical claims about Paul and Christian origins should be drawn from the book of Acts only with great caution (see Chapter 4).

Such caution means *interrogating* the evidence of Acts in light of what Paul says in his own letters, a method called synoptic reading. Let’s do that now. Both Acts and Galatians claim to report the same event – Paul’s first visit to Jerusalem following Christ’s revelation to him – but there are clear contradictions between them (see Box 2).

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The book of Acts depicts the event as a public visit, in which Paul developed intimate and long associations with the Jerusalem apostles. In contrast, Paul in Galatians describes it as a private meeting only with Peter, an encounter with no other apostle except James the brother of Jesus. Acts states that Paul preached openly among the Judean believers and entered into debates with nonbelievers – observable activities that made him so personally well known in the city that a plot arose against his life. But in Galatians, Paul himself states that his brief visit was uneventful, leaving him still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea well after he departed the city, without a hint of a death plot. Reading the two sources synoptically, therefore, makes their contradictions clear. Acts narrates what Paul himself swears, before God, never occurred (Gal. 1:20). To force the two different accounts of Acts and Galatians together will not work, because such an attempt at harmonization would create a narrative unlike what we find in either source – in other words, bad methodology.

At this point a reader might ask, Wasn't Luke a companion of Paul and so an eyewitness of the events he narrates in the book of Acts? In reply, I would of course agree that the author of Acts also wrote the Gospel of Luke. We know this to be the case from the evidence in the sources themselves: the first line of Acts (1:1) explicitly mentions the preface of Luke (1:1–4). Acts is the second part of a two-volume work, the first part being the Gospel of Luke, with Luke's preface being intended to cover the work of Luke–Acts as a whole. But this does not prove that Luke, a Pauline associate mentioned only in other writings (Philem. 24; Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11) and otherwise unknown, wrote Luke–Acts. Indeed, the name *Luke* occurs in neither Acts nor the Gospel, and in fact the author never tells his name. The work is therefore anonymous. The title “The Gospel according to Luke” is not original but secondary (an *inscriptio*), which Christian scribes copying the manuscript later added to the text to indicate the work's place in a canon of Scripture. We know this in part because the title presupposes (the Gospel *according to Luke*) a later collation of multiple Gospels into a single literary corpus. (Scholars, including myself, continue to call the author “Luke,” but for convenience.) Our main source of the legend that Luke, “the beloved physician,” traveled with Paul and supposedly recorded the apostle's preaching in a “book” (the canonical book of Acts) is the church father Irenaeus of Lyons (see Appendix 3). That legend, however, contradicts the evidence in Luke's prologue, in which the author admits not being an eyewitness to the events that he narrates (see Box 3).

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Box 3 Luke–Acts Describes Itself as a Secondary Source: The Prologue

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth about which you have been instructed. (Luke 1:1–4)

The author of Luke–Acts asserts “the truth” of his writing in part because he also acknowledges his work not to be contemporary with the events to which it refers. In our terms, Luke admits to writing a secondary source: the stories come secondhand (Luke 1:2, “handed on to *us* by *those* who from the beginning were eyewitnesses”). The author depends upon earlier written sources currently in circulation (Luke 1:1, “many have undertaken to set down an orderly account”) and exercises critical judgment over his sources (Luke 1:3, “after investigating everything carefully”) on the belief that reliance upon those prior sources alone prevents the truth to be told (Luke 1:4, “so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed”). The evidence of the prologue, which describes the entire two-volume work as a secondary source, thus undermines the later church legends about the author being a companion of Paul.

Nonetheless, dissenting interpreters often point to an outworn claim that four passages of Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16) switch to the first person (“we”) as alleged evidence of the historical reliability of Acts, from its nature as a eyewitness source (a personal diary in which the author personally participated in the events narrated). But this objection fails to consider carefully the evidence and any alternative explanations. The abruptness with which the “we” passages begin and end in the narrative read more like fragments of a prior source, a stock travelogue of sorts, around which the author of Acts built those sections of his work. The “we” is not necessarily “Paul and Luke”; even if that were the case, the first person could be pseudonymous.

Leaving aside the eyewitness claim as unfounded, we move to another potential objection: Doesn’t the fact that the author of Luke–Acts used prior written sources, “investigating them carefully,” guarantee the work’s overall historical reliability? Not really. When we compare Luke and one