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The Historical Paul

A Review Essay

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What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity? By N.T. Wright. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997. 192 pages. \$14.00.

The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus. By Ben Witherington III. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998. 300 pages. \$29.99.

It might be argued that, over the last couple of decades, the Third Quest for the historical Jesus has been the central topic in contemporary theology. Dozens of publications have appeared as scholars on the left, right, and center of the religious spectrum have honed their research skills on this far ranging subject.

Now studies of the historical Paul (Saul) of Tarsus have started to move into a similar, if more restricted, arena. A recent book catalog advertised ten new volumes on the man that some have called the greatest Christian theologian and missionary. Like the studies of Jesus, some of these texts are massive in their depth and scope. For instance, Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer spent over 300 pages on a period of Paul's life when almost nothing is known about him!¹

The purpose of this article is to briefly review and comment on two recent volumes that are written by key participants in the historical Jesus discussions: N.T. Wright's *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the*

¹ Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Paul between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

Real Founder of Christianity? and Ben Witherington III's *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus*. In some ways these texts are extensions of their earlier studies.²

A comparison of the tables of contents of these two texts immediately reveals different angles on the subject. N. T. Wright takes a more traditional theological approach, viewing Paul's pre-conversion persecution of the church, his conversion, and his newly-found proclamation in comparison to Jesus, the Gentiles, the Jews, and the church. Throughout, Wright is concerned with Paul's presentation of the Gospel and other key themes in relation to Jesus' message.

On the other hand, Witherington's strategy is more in keeping with contemporary portraits in current studies of Paul. He views the apostle in terms of his social and anthropological background, his identity, his writing, his use of rhetoric, as well as his conceptions of the roles of prophet and apostle. He also addresses Paul's storytelling, hermeneutics, exegesis, anthropology, ethics, and his theology. He ends with an appendix that attempts a reconstruction of Paul's chronology, both concerning his life and his writings.

Witherington's text is written in a more scholarly style, including hundreds of footnotes, but without being technical or difficult to read. It is helpful to serious students of all sorts. Wright's work is more conversational and popularly written, as Wright himself admits (8).⁴ Some of his chapters do not include endnotes, while none include more than eight notes.

Throughout their volumes, Wright and Witherington share a number of common emphases that are an integral part of recent discussions. They often return to these topics over and over. We will note some of those that might be of interest to *Philosophia Christi* readers.

For example, both writers are careful to set forth (i) their own method, revolving around the primary use of what critical scholars admit are the undisputedly genuine Pauline epistles (at least Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians³). Neither wants to base any major conclusions on the disputed books, although certain others may be used for support (Wright, 8; Witherington, 9-11, 109-14).

²For example, see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) and *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

³Witherington adds I Thessalonians and Philemon (109-10), while both authors give varying degrees of weight to the other epistles that bear Paul's name.

⁴Page numbers in the text refer only to the two main texts by Wright and Witherington that we are addressing throughout.

Other key themes include (ii) Paul's definition of the Gospel (Wright, Chapter 9, especially 158-60; Witherington, 12-13, 264, 275, 284-85, 289; 296), which includes (iii) the deity of Jesus Christ (Wright, 55-57, 63-73; 133, 153-57; Witherington, 247, cf. 294), and (iv) the centrality of Jesus' resurrection (Wright, 46, 49-50, 131, 145, 150, 172-75; Witherington, (248, 264, 273, 284-85, 291-94). (v) The resurrection provides confirmation of Jesus' teachings (Wright, 36-7, 46, 93, 180; Witherington, cf. 294).

Intriguingly, in light of recent discussions, both authors affirm that Paul held resolutely that the resurrection of both Jesus and believers was something that happened to their bodies (Wright, 50-1; Witherington, 18, 51, 138, 147-51, 210-13). Wright states that this "is vital to grasp. . . . If you had suggested to [Paul] that 'the resurrection' might have occurred while the tomb of Jesus was still occupied by his corpse, he wouldn't just have disagreed; he would have suggested that you didn't understand what the relevant words meant. . . . [resurrection] had to do, specifically, with re-embodiment, with a new physical existence" (50). Witherington states that "In I Corinthians 6:14 it becomes abundantly clear that *resurrection involves a body*" (148, emphasis his) and Paul, "expected something just as dramatic to happen to believers and their bodies as had already happened to their Lord on Easter" (154).

Wright and Witherington both have some intriguing thoughts about the nature of apocalyptic language and the return of the Lord. While they share some views about figurative language, there are significant differences, too (Wright, 141-42; Witherington, 136-42, 272). Further, both also like to discuss the age that Paul thought was inaugurated by Jesus' resurrection—what Witherington calls "the already and not yet" (Witherington, 154; 272, 278, 294) and Wright refers to variously as "*the middle of time*," "the time of the end," and "the *first days*" (Wright, 36-7, 50, respectively, his emphasis).

Each author, of course, also has some separate emphases and contrasts. Wright includes both a helpful chapter that evaluates some of the major twentieth-century studies of Paul (Chapter 1), and an annotated bibliography of prominent Pauline studies (185-92). Witherington's chronology of Paul's life and works is equally beneficial (appendix). Having written a longer volume, he also includes numerous discussions of Paul's view of the Old Testament Law (52-3, 65-9, 159, 269-72), and what might anachronistically be called Paul's use of primary and secondary theology (288-91, 302-3).

A last major ingredient needs to be mentioned, requiring some elaboration and comment. When one thinks of dominant issues over the years with regard to Paul, at least two other critical matters continue to arise. Although they were certainly more common chiefly in a nineteenth-century context, they have not disappeared in this century. Did Paul's thought differ considerably from that of Jesus, especially in the sense of changing his Lord's teachings, so that Paul might be considered as the true founder of

Christianity? Were Paul's ideas substantially derived from Hellenistic sources?⁵

But here these two books appear to differ widely, presenting us with a bit of a conundrum. This reviewer found it very strange that, on the one hand, Wright went as far as to subtitle his volume with the first question of whether Paul was the true founder of Christianity. Accordingly, he spends considerable time on the issue (Chapter 10, plus pages 22, 188). Wright credits David Wenham's volume *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?*⁶ with being the best and most recent text on this important issue (Wright 182, 190).

Still, strangely enough, Wright commits the vast majority of his space to a critique of A.N. Wilson's recent treatment in *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle*,⁷ even though Wilson is a novelist and biographer whom Wright calls theologically hopeless (190-1). It might be wondered if Jewish scholar Hyam Maccoby's books *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* and *Paul and Hellenism* might have been better targets.⁸

Wright also mentions, if only briefly, the Hellenistic thesis, which is likewise a part of both Wilson's and Maccoby's agenda. Wright is careful to inform his readers that only a very few Pauline scholars venture in this direction (20, 70, 77, 172). However, providing some careful reasons for this conclusion would have been preferable here, as opposed to just giving the report itself.

On the other hand, it was surprising to find that Witherington scarcely even mentions the entire twofold issue. True, he does say that the Hellenistic question is an older concern. Yet he also acknowledges that it is "still with us" today (11). So it might seem odd that one has to look for awhile to find related comments (cf. 284, 288).

Thus it would be easy to conclude that perhaps Witherington just does not consider these questions to be very influential in recent studies of Paul,

which is where he clearly places his primary emphasis (11-12). But he expressly lists Wilson's study as one of "three significant works" to have appeared recently (15, 17). So perhaps the reader could be forgiven if she thereby expected or even desired a critique of a "significant" thesis that is so diametrically opposed to Witherington's own.⁹ Yet no such treatment is forthcoming.

We have noted that other equally qualified scholars give far more weight to proposals like those of Maccoby and Wilson, even to the point of deserving a subtitle on Wright's volume and Eerdmans' reviewers deciding to publish Wenham's entire book on related problems. So the absence in Witherington is all the more curious in that his treatment is much longer than Wright's and appeared three years later than Wenham's, though he still does not so much as list Wenham's volume in his fairly detailed bibliography.

I definitely wish to be sensitive to criticisms of authors where the point is basically to complain that other scholars disagree with them. "So what?" one is tempted to respond, and often rightly so. But when Witherington prepares us by mentioning Wilson as a notable challenge, without any direct response, this adds weight to the position of those scholars who do treat the issue in more depth.

At this point, I do *not* want the reader to lose sight of my main concern. It is not that Witherington prefers to treat other subjects that are presently more influential. Rather, my concern is that he has already provided the clue that the charges against Paul (that he altered Jesus' teachings and/or exhibited Hellenistic influences) are both still current and significant. So Witherington basically fails to handle a crucial issue that begs for treatment.

In other words, my chief interest is not to dispute what should and should not appear in the agenda of a book like this. It is that virtually ignoring this subject is a weighty omission since the objection is still going to be made. Hence, scholars who specialize in these areas are the ones who most need to give in-depth answers. Witherington seems at least to acknowledge the issue here when he speaks of Wilson's significance. So actually, I am complimenting Witherington. I think he would be one of the ideal scholars to address these concerns and I would like to have seen him do it, or at least to give a detailed overview of such a response.

While I think that Witherington has made a serious omission, I also think that he and Wright have both given us studies concerning the historical Paul that are to be commended for addressing an overall topic that is of

⁹In a footnote, Witherington does refer the reader to Wright's critique (17 n.17).

⁵Both of these questions are often associated with the influential teachings of Rudolf Bultmann. In his introduction to Paul's thought in his *Theology of the New Testament*, Bultmann asserts that Paul stood in the tradition of Hellenistic Christianity. Even before his conversion, he was acquainted with religious syncretism, including the teachings of the mystery religions and Gnosticism. Rejecting Palestinian theology, he amalgamated many of these Hellenistic strands into a new system that moved away from Jesus' preaching. See Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols., trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, 1955), 1:187-9.

⁶David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

⁷A. N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (New York: Norton, 1997).

⁸Hyam Maccoby, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986); *Paul and Hellenism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991).

central importance; one that is receiving increasing attention from scholars. We need such treatments that will plot a course through a growing field where most readers simply cannot survey all the relevant literature and issues themselves. †