

# Portraits of Paul; the myth and reality

## Introduction

The portraits of Paul that have emerged over the centuries are both visually and in a literary sense so numerous that it is difficult to discern the myth from the reality. In the visual sense we have the works of artists from the 5<sup>th</sup> century mosaics of Ravenna to the 15<sup>th</sup> century Rublev and Masaccio, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Dürer, 17<sup>th</sup> century El Greco, de la Tour and Rembrandt and the 18<sup>th</sup> century Batoni and, of course, many more.

One of the most recent literary portraits, from the British author Philip Pullman, credits him with being a ‘literary and imaginative genius’ with more influence than Jesus but from whose ‘fervid imagination’ a religion was spawned that has inspired ‘rancid and fanatical bigotry’.<sup>1</sup> The idea that Paul was the founder of either Christianity or a pseudo-Christianity is not, however, new since it has surfaced throughout church history. It has also been seen beyond the church in the writings of, for example, Nietzsche which are developed further by Bernard Shaw’s claim that ‘No sooner had Jesus knocked over the dragon of superstition than Paul boldly set it on its legs again in the name of Jesus...’<sup>2</sup>

This issue will be addressed further in another paper but it is worth noting that Nietzsche’s claims centre on our perceived inability to read the writings of Paul with ‘honest and independent minds’<sup>3</sup> which raises the important question of the presuppositions and pre-understandings that we will bring to the text based on our individual backgrounds and experiences. These will inevitably play a part in the shaping of our own portrait of Paul and can be seen in the different attitudes and depths of feeling that are evoked in both Christian and secular communities today when his name is mentioned.

A survey by Meeks of a collection of interpretations or portraits of Paul from a wide range of scholarship concludes that ‘Paul is the Christian Proteus’; the *daimon* of the sea

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<sup>1</sup> P. Pullman, ‘The Good Man Jesus and The Scoundrel Christ’ (Dominion Post 7/9/09).

<sup>2</sup> B. Shaw, *Preface on the Prospects of Christianity*, as cited by Meeks, *The Writings of St Paul*, 299.

<sup>3</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The First Christians*, as cited by Meeks, *The Writings of St Paul*, 192.

who could assume any form'.<sup>4</sup> His explanation for this is that, 'We never see pure Pauline thought being developed at leisure by its own inner logic; rather we see Paul always thinking under pressure, usually in the heat of immediate controversy.'<sup>5</sup>

Again some of these controversies will be addressed later today but the purpose of this introductory paper is to raise the following issues;

- Whether or not the exegetical conclusions at which any interpreter arrives can be isolated from his or her provisional understanding of the mind of Paul or of Pauline thought as a whole.<sup>6</sup> Given that;
- What quite often happens in Pauline scholarship is that Paul is assumed to hold a view credited to him by some of his expositors, and a scholar who disagrees with that view criticizes Paul as if he were responsible for it.<sup>7</sup>
- The impact of Paul's writing in our church communities today is, therefore, to some extent dependent on our ability to discern whether or not we are concerned with what Paul may actually have meant or with what we should like him, or assume him to have meant!

These issues suggest that two important questions that we need to consider before embarking on any study of Paul are;

- 1. What is our gut reaction/response to St Paul and how has it developed and possibly changed over time?**
- 2. How will this influence us as we decide which aspects of his teaching we value and want to retain and how much we can or should dismiss as anachronistic and discriminatory?**

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<sup>4</sup> W. Meeks, *The Writings of St Paul* (New York:Norton, 1972) 438.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> A. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids:Zondervan, 1992) 237.

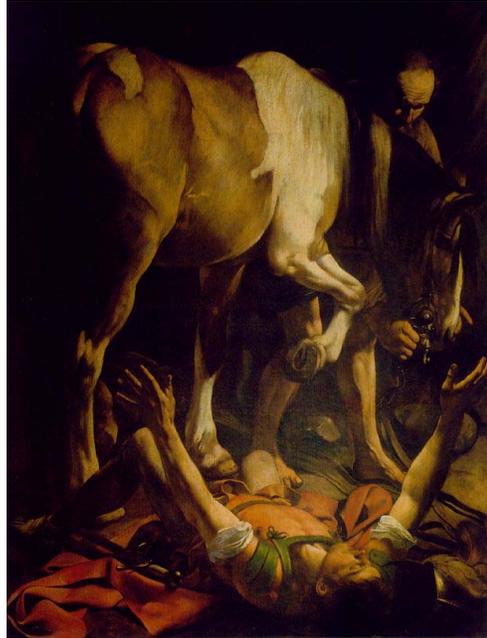
<sup>7</sup> N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London:SPCK, 1992) 102.

# Building a portrait of Paul

## Conversion and Call

Conversion of Paul, Caravaggio 1600-1601

The best starting point in the building of a portrait of Paul is found within the early texts that are available to us bearing in mind the frequent disputes about their historical veracity. From The Acts of Paul and Thecla, written in the second century C.E, we learn that;



**He was a man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were projecting, and he had large eyes and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long, and he was full of grace and mercy; at one time he seemed like a man, and at another time he seemed like an angel.**

(Acts of Paul & Thecla)

While initially popular such apocryphal writings were, however, eventually rejected by the early church and the two main sources with any historical credibility remaining to us today are;

1. The Acts of the Apostles as secondary evidence written about Paul by someone else.
2. Paul's own writings as primary evidence (acknowledging that the authorship of some his letters is also in dispute).

If we can believe that Luke, as the author of Acts, was a reliable Hellenistic historian<sup>8</sup> linking events in Paul's life with people or events known to historians from sources outside the New Testament then Acts provides a narrative account of Paul's ministry recounting events in a particular sequence from his dramatic introduction as Saul in Acts 7:58 to his eventual domination of the narrative from Acts 15:40 until the end of the book. Paul's own writings, in the form of his letters, provide further insights from a seemingly independent source although there are many parallels in their respective portrayals.

Neither source, however, provides much information about Paul's life before his conversion/call although it is possible to conclude from the texts that he was the product of the confluence of three cultural orientations – Jewish, Hellenistic Greek and Roman as the evidence suggests that;

- ❖ He was a Roman citizen, like his parents before him.
- ❖ He was born in one of the centers of Hellenistic culture, Tarsus in Asia Minor.
- ❖ He was a child of orthodox Jews who took or sent him to Jerusalem at an early age to study at the feet of the notable teacher Gamaliel and to become, himself, a Pharisaic teacher.<sup>9</sup>

While such information is important for an understanding of his theology it is significant that for the New Testament his life begins with the experience that occurred on the road to Damascus. Both Acts and the letters agree that Paul's life-changing encounter with the risen Christ was separate from, and later than, the resurrection appearances to the other apostles (Acts 9:3-5 and 1 Corinthians 15:3-9) and also concur that prior to this Paul was a persecutor of the church (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; Acts 7:58, 8:1; 9:1-2). The personal encounter on the Damascus road would, however, transform his life determining the whole course of his subsequent thought and action and turning his previous devotion to the Law to a new understanding of the primacy of grace and the redemptive act of Christ on the cross.

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<sup>8</sup> See C Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, 181-89.

<sup>9</sup> B Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 1.

Other papers will look at Paul's theology in detail but it is worth noting here that the traditional understanding of the Damascus road experience, going back to Augustine, is that of an inner conversion in which the Jewish persecutor became the Christian convert.<sup>10</sup> More recently, however, scholarship has questioned this assumption seeing the New Testament documents as recording primarily a call to be an apostle to the Gentiles leading Paul to a new interpretation of the role of the Law.

The debate is complex and ongoing but indicates that we have to beware of imposing potentially anachronistic categories on ancient descriptions of a complex religious event. We perhaps need instead the hermeneutical humility to recognize that Paul's experience is far too rich to fit neatly into any of our categories traditional or otherwise. When we impose our Western understanding of either conversion or call on the NT texts we can be left with a distorted understanding of Paul's experience.<sup>11</sup> This combined with the impact of psychological and sociological research has led many to a profound suspicion of Paul's claims and the subsequent authority of his teaching. Trying to fit Paul into traditional Protestant or even contemporary categories is, therefore, problematic emphasizing the need to return to the Biblical text, examining what it actually tells us while respecting the complexities of his experiences and the limited amount that we know about the situations that his writings addressed.

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<sup>10</sup> J. Everts, 'Conversion and Call of St Paul', in G. Hawthorne, R. Martin and D. Reid (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, (Leicester: IVP, 1993) 156.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

# The Writings of Paul

**St Paul Writing his Epistles,**

**Valentin de Boulogne or Nicolas  
Tournier 1620**



As we turn to the Biblical text, we find that 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament are attributed to the authorship of Paul, and although their placement in our New Testament is after the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, we need to recall that Paul's letters are the earliest documents in time of the NT, they were probably written in the years of the 50s and early 60s CE, so within a generation of Jesus' death and resurrection.

It is really important to register too that Paul's writings are **Letters**, written to the young Christian church communities around the Mediterranean, and so are written to particular contexts and often responding to issues arising from those particular communities - our task is often described as 'listening in on one half of a telephone conversation, when we'd love to hear the other person as well!' And sometimes that conversation is addressed with a good deal of the passion of the moment: as one scholar wrote of Paul's letter to the Galatians: 'to read the letter aright, one must read it as one half of a ferocious debate, and imagine the harassed and distraught apostle pacing and dictating, sometimes pleading, sometimes grumbling, but often yelling...'<sup>12</sup>

We need to ask when looking at these essentially situational letters, whether what Paul is saying is descriptive of a situation, or prescriptive as to what should happen in a situation then or in the future.

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<sup>12</sup> E.P.Sanders, *Paul- A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 62.

As scholars have looked at the 13 letters attributed to Paul, many have come to the conclusion that at least some of these 13 were not in fact written by Paul, but were written after his death (in the early 60s CE) and in his name by a follower(s) of Paul who wanted his message, teaching and personal example to continue to inspire and order the young churches. This use of a respected pseudonym in authorship was common in antiquity.

This particularly applies to what are called **the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus)**, called 'pastoral' as they seem to reflect the pastoral needs and conditions of a later generation in church life where things are becoming more 'institutionalised' with church structures forming.

They also contain emphases and teachings (e.g. on the participation of women in the church) that are considerably at odds with those in letters indisputably written by Paul, and their vocabulary and style is very different from Pauline letters.

Some scholars would also consider that 3 other letters do not reflect Pauline authorship: **Ephesians, Colossians and 2 Thessalonians**. Ephesians differs in vocabulary and literary style from Paul's letters but also has many echoes of the Pauline letters. Other scholars would affirm Pauline authorship of these letters, with the different situations and contexts addressed, and development of Paul's thinking accounting for the contrasts.

Other scholars have raised issues about the different portrayal of Paul in **the Acts of the Apostles** by Luke, from what we see in Paul's letters. Recall that Acts was written later than Paul's Epistles, probably in the last third of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Tradition has it that the author of Luke/Acts was the Luke who was the companion of Paul for at least some of his missionary journeys, hence the 'we' passages in Acts (20:6ff), where Luke slips into including himself in the travelogue! Yet Luke in Acts presents us with a somewhat stylized portrait of Paul, he is portrayed as much more observant of the Jewish law than Paul espouses in his own letters to others! Summaries of Paul's preaching in Acts have much to say on the resurrection of Christ, but nothing on the theme of justification of faith which is so important in some of Paul's letters.

Questions have been asked too about the extent of Paul's knowledge of the life and teachings of Jesus, as little appears in Paul's letters about Jesus' birth and life, his teaching

or parables, all of which will be recounted in the later produced **Gospels**. While Paul seems to know traditions which were being passed on about the Last Supper (1 Cor 11) and some of the resurrection appearances of Jesus (1 Cor 15), he says nothing of the empty tomb or the resurrection appearances to the women which are so key to the Gospel accounts. For some scholars, this raises questions about whether the early church 'invented' some of the gospel stories to address issues of their generation, but it would be hard to build a case just from the fact that Paul does not (choose to) mention them.

Many scholars have highlighted the differences in teaching between **Jesus** (as recorded in the Gospels) and **Paul** in his letters. This has often led to polarisation :

- Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, Paul preached the Messiahship of Jesus.
- Jesus called people to a simple gospel of repentance, faith and living out the Sermon on the Mount;  
Paul developed a complex theology of justification by faith in Jesus's sacrificial death.
- Jesus talked of himself as the Son of Man; Paul proclaimed Jesus as Son of God, Saviour and Lord.
- Jesus preached a wonderfully positive and liberating message which brought good news to women, slaves, the poor; Paul put the lid back on and put them all firmly back in their place

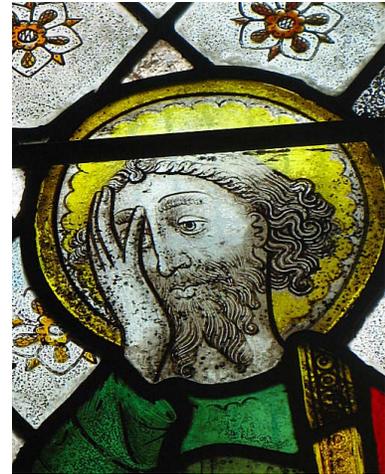
Such differences between Jesus and Paul have lead some to the conclusion that Paul took Jesus and transformed either the simple Galilean teacher or the radical social revolutionary and made him into something completely different - the result: Christianity!

It all depends on your perspective – which we are going to turn to now...

# Concluding Comments

## Perspectives on Paul: Old & New

Doddiscombsleigh church, stained glass window  
Devon UK



Modern Pauline research has highlighted the crucial importance of determining the historical context in which Paul's thought was developed and expressed particularly in response to the needs of his communities and the opposition he faced. Research has also made clear that one's view of Paul will be determined above all by whether one interprets his letters predominantly against the Greco-Roman philosophical and religious world of Paul's day as Bultmann argued or in the light of the Hellenistic-Jewish world of the first century and its Scriptures as Schlatter proposed in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to mention that in 1977 E.P. Sanders challenged the traditional understanding of the relationship between Paul and Judaism or the Law suggesting that first-century Judaism did not espouse a legalistic soteriology in the sense of good works earning salvation but began with grace in the form of God's election of and covenant with Israel.<sup>14</sup> Works of obedience to the law were, indeed required to experience life, but these works were the response to prior grace and were not human actions that earned divine favour.<sup>15</sup>

This 'New Perspective' on Paul sparked debate that continues to this day reinforcing the fact that the fundamental issue still to be resolved in Pauline studies is the determination of the *primary* religious and theological context within which Paul's thought is to be

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<sup>13</sup> S. Hafemann, 'Paul and his Interpreters', in G. Hawthorne, R. Martin and D. Reid (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 678.

<sup>14</sup> K. Yinger, 'Synergism and the New Perspective', *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3.1 (2009) 89 – 106, citing p. 90.

<sup>15</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

understood.<sup>16</sup> How one decides this issue will determine how one reads Paul. And how one reads Paul will determine how one evaluates the relationship between Jesus and Paul on the one hand and the place of Paul in the development of the early church on the other.<sup>17</sup> Both these topics are to be addressed in the papers presented later today but as we struggle to discern the myth from the reality and the place of Paul in our contemporary churches we should perhaps reflect for a while on the 14th-century window from the Devonshire church in which Paul is depicted. In doing so we could then consider whether or not our efforts to interpret his work might just leave him in such apparent despair, head in hand, bewildered by our failure to recognize, or even ability to manipulate, the truth that he felt compelled to impart. Paul has always been confrontational in both myth and reality and is no less so in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than he was in the 1<sup>st</sup>. As the first Christian theologian he cannot, though, be easily dismissed and we continue to be challenged by the content of his writing and how we interpret it into our own specific setting. In this respect perhaps the only real questions that remain are whether or not we can rise to this challenge and what resources we may require to do so.

**Sarah Beattie**

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<sup>16</sup> S. Hafemann, 'Paul and his Interpreters' in G. Hawthorne, R. Martin and D. Reid (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 678.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

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### **Questions for small group discussion**

- 1. What is our gut reaction/response to St Paul and how has it developed and possibly changed over time?**
- 2. How will this influence us as we decide which aspects of his teaching we value and want to retain and how much we can or should dismiss as anachronistic and discriminatory?**