PAUL

PAUL

A BIOGRAPHY

TOM
WRIGHT

Published in the United States of America in 2018
by HarperOne, San Francisco, California

Published in Great Britain in 2018

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
36 Causton Street
London SWlP 4ST
www.spck.org.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–281–07875–2
eBook ISBN 978–0–281–07877–6

First printed in Great Britain by TJ International
Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

eBook by Manila Typesetting Company, Makati City

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

In loving memory of Carey Alison Wright
October 12, 1956–June 3, 2017

CONTENTS

List of Maps ix
Preface xi

Introduction 1

PART ONE: BEGINNINGS

1. Zeal 27
2. Damascus 41
3. Arabia and Tarsus 61
4. Antioch 85

PART TWO: HERALD OF THE KING

5. Cyprus and Galatia 103
6. Antioch and Jerusalem 133
7. Into Europe 171
8. Athens 193
9. Corinth I 209
10. Ephesus I 235
11. Ephesus II 271
12. Corinth II 303
13. Jerusalem Again 339

PART THREE: THE SEA, THE SEA

14. From Caesarea to Rome—and Beyond? 375
15. The Challenge of Paul 399

Chronological Table 433
Notes 435
Scripture Index 447
Subject Index 455

LIST OF MAPS

Paul's World xiv

Tarsus to Jerusalem 26

Jerusalem to Damascus 40

Return to Tarsus 60

Tarsus to Antioch 84

To and from Galatia 102

Antioch to Jerusalem 132

Antioch to Athens 170

Athens 192

Athens to Corinth 208

Journeys Through Asia Minor 234

Ephesus 270

Ephesus to Corinth 302

Corinth to Jerusalem 338

Caesarea to Rome 374

Paul's World 398

PREFACE

The apostle paul is one of a handful of people from the ancient world whose words still have the capacity to leap off the page and confront us. Whether we agree with him or not—whether we *like* him or not!—his letters are personal and passionate, sometimes tearful and sometimes teasing, often dense but never dull. But who was he? What made him tick? And why did his seemingly erratic missionary career have such a profound influence on the world of ancient Greece and Rome and thereby on the world of our own day?

Any worthwhile answer must presuppose the detailed historical and theological study of his letters in debate with ongoing scholarship. I have tried to do this in *The Climax of the Covenant* (1991/1992), *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (2013), the collection of essays entitled *Pauline Perspectives* (2013), and the survey of modern (largely Anglophone) research *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (2015).[1] But the biographer's questions are subtly different. We are searching for the man behind the texts.

Like most historians, I try to include all relevant evidence within as simple a framework as possible. I do not regard it a virtue to decide ahead of time against either the Pauline authorship

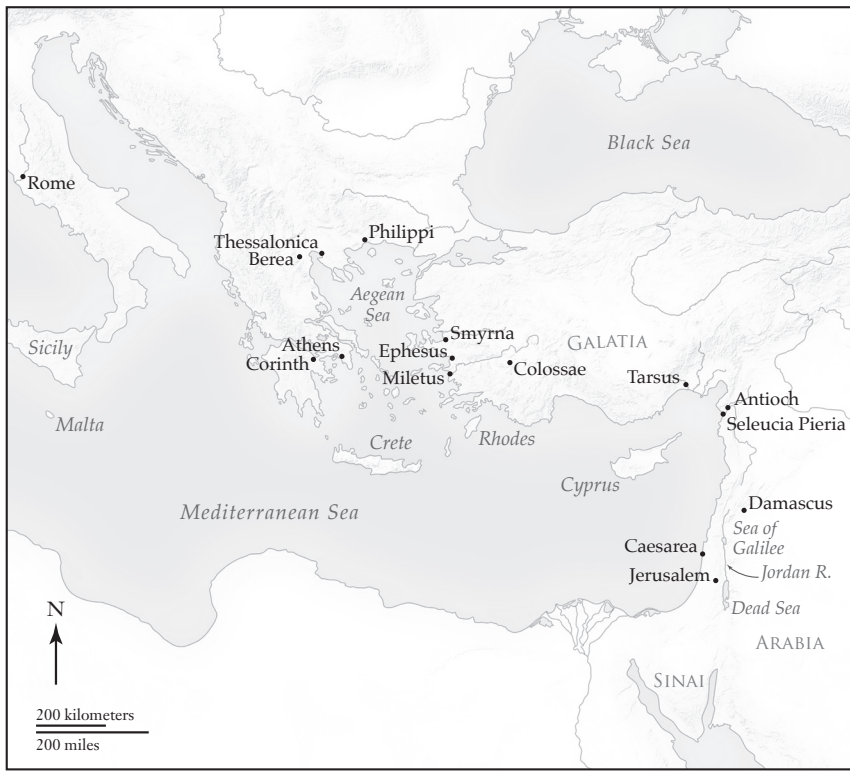
of some of the letters or the historicity of the Acts of the Apostles (on the grounds, perhaps, that Luke was writing long after the events, inventing material to fit his theology). Each generation has to start the jigsaw with all the pieces on the table and to see if the pieces can be plausibly fitted together to create a prima facie case. In particular, I make two large assumptions: first, a South Galatian address for Galatians; second, an Ephesian imprisonment as the location of the Prison Letters. In the former I am following, among many others, Stephen Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor,* vol. 2, *The Rise of the Church*.[2] In the latter I am indebted to many, including an older work by a St. Andrews predecessor, George S. Duncan, *Paul's Ephesian Ministry: A Reconstruction*.[3] I have found that these hypotheses make excellent sense of the historical, theological, and biographical data. References to primary sources are found in the notes at the end, but I have not usually cluttered things up with endless references to Acts itself.

A small note on style. Despite protests, I keep the lowercase *s* in "(holy) spirit," because that conforms to my own translation, which I use here[4] (translations of Old Testament quotations are either my own or from the NRSV), and particularly because when Paul wrote the Greek word *pneuma,* he did not have the option of a distinction between upper and lower case. His letters were in any case written initially to be read out loud. The word *pneuma* had to make its way in a world where it had different shades of philosophical and religious meaning without the help of visible markings. This itself makes an important point about Paul, who told and lived a Jesus-shaped Jewish message in a confused and contested world.

I am grateful to several friends and colleagues who have read all or part of this book in draft and have offered suggestions, corrections, additions, and clarifications. They are not responsible for the errors that remain. I think particularly of Simon Kingston, Scot McKnight, Mike Bird, Mike Gorman, Max Botner, Craig Keener, Andrew Cowan, John Richardson, and Jonathan Sacks.

The publishers have been uniformly helpful and encouraging; I'm thinking of Mickey Maudlin, Noël Chrisman, and their coworkers at HarperOne, and Sam Richardson, Philip Law, and their coworkers at SPCK. I am once again grateful to my colleagues and students at St. Andrews for their encouragement and enthusiasm, and to my dear family for their unfailing support. The book is dedicated to the beloved memory of my late sister-in-law, Carey Wright, who like Paul gave love and joy unstintingly to those around her.

Tom Wright
Ascension Day, 2017
St. Andrews


Black Sea
Rome
Thessalonica
Philippi
Berea
Aegean Sea
Smyrna
GALATIA
Sicily
Athens
Ephesus
Corinth
Colossae
Miletus
Tarsus
Antioch
Seleucia Pieria
Malta
Crete
Rhodes
Cyprus
Damascus
Mediterranean Sea
Sea of Galilee
Caesarea
Jerusalem
Jordan R.
Dead Sea
N
ARABIA
SINAI
200 kilometers
200 miles

Paul's World

Introduction

Human culture has normally developed at the speed of a glacier. We moderns, accustomed to sudden changes and dramatic revolutions, need to remind ourselves that things have not usually worked this way. Slow and steady has been the rule. Occasional inventions that suddenly transform human life for good or ill—the wheel, the printing press, gunpowder, the Internet—are rare.

That is why the events that unfolded two thousand years ago in southeastern Europe and western Asia are still as startling in retrospect as they were at the time. An energetic and talkative man, not much to look at and from a despised race, went about from city to city talking about the One God and his "son" Jesus, setting up small communities of people who accepted what he said and then writing letters to them, letters whose explosive charge is as fresh today as when they were first dictated. Paul might dispute the suggestion that he himself changed the world; Jesus, he would have said, had already done that. But what he said about Jesus, and about God, the world, and what it meant to be genuinely human, was creative and compelling—and controversial, in his own day and ever after. Nothing would ever be quite the same again.

Consider the remarkable facts. Paul's letters, in a standard modern translation, occupy fewer than eighty pages. Even taken as a whole, they are shorter than almost any single one of Plato's dialogues or Aristotle's treatises. It is a safe bet to say that these letters, page for page, have generated more comment, more sermons and seminars, more monographs and dissertations than any other writings from the ancient world. (The gospels, taken together, are half as long again.) It is as though eight or ten small paintings by an obscure artist were to become more sought after, more studied and copied, more highly valued than all the Rembrandts and Titians and all the Monets and Van Goghs in the world.

This raises a set of questions for any historian or would-be biographer. How did it happen? What did this busy little man have that other people didn't? What did he think he was doing, and why was he doing it? How did someone with his background and upbringing, which had produced saints and scholars but nobody at all like this, come to be speaking, traveling, and writing in this way? That is the first challenge of the present book: to get inside the mind, the understanding, the ambition (if that's the right word) of Paul the Apostle, known earlier as Saul of Tarsus. What motivated him, in his heart of hearts?

That question leads immediately to the second one. When Saul encountered the news about Jesus, his mind was not a blank slate. He had been going full tilt in the opposite direction. More than once he reminds his readers that he had been brought up in a school of Jewish thought that adhered strictly to the ancestral traditions. As a young man, Saul of Tarsus had become a leading light in this movement, the aim of whose members was to urge their fellow Jews into more radical obedience to the ancient codes and to discourage them from any deviations by all means possible, up to and including violence. Why did all that change? What exactly happened on the road to Damascus?

This poses a problem for today's readers that had better be mentioned at once, though we will only be able to address it bit by

bit. The term "Damascus Road" has become proverbial, referring to any sudden transformation in personal belief or character, any "conversion," whether "religious," "political," or even aesthetic. One can imagine a critic declaring that, having previously detested the music of David Bowie, he had now had a "Damascus Road" moment and had come to love it. This contemporary proverbial usage gets in the way. It makes it harder for us to understand the original event. So does the language of "conversion" itself. That word today might point to someone being "converted" from secular atheism or agnosticism to some form of Christian belief, or perhaps to someone being "converted" from a "religion" such as Buddhism or Islam to a "religion" called "Christianity"—or, of course, vice versa. Thus, many have assumed that on the road to Damascus Saul of Tarsus was "converted" from something called "Judaism" to something called "Christianity"—and that in his mature thought he was *comparing* these two "religions," explaining why the latter was to be preferred. But if we approach matters in that way we will, quite simply, never understand either Saul of Tarsus or Paul the Apostle.

For a start, and as a sign that there are tricky corners to be turned, the word "Judaism" in Paul's world (Greek *Ioudaïsmos*) didn't refer to what we would call "a religion." For that matter, and again to signal challenges ahead, the word "religion" has itself changed meaning. In Paul's day, "religion" consisted of God-related activities that, along with politics and community life, held a culture together and bound the members of that culture to its divinities and to one another. In the modern Western world, "religion" tends to mean God-related individual beliefs and practices that are supposedly separable from culture, politics, and community life. For Paul, "religion" was woven in with all of life; for the modern Western world, it is separated from it.

So when, in what is probably his earliest letter, Paul talks about "advancing in Judaism beyond any of his age,"[1] the word "Judaism" refers, not to a "religion," but to an *activity:* the zealous

propagation and defense of the ancestral way of life. From the point of view of Saul of Tarsus, the first followers of Jesus of Nazareth were a prime example of the deviant behavior that had to be eradicated if Israel's God was to be honored. Saul of Tarsus was therefore "zealous" (his term,[2] indicating actual violence, not just strong emotion) in persecuting these people. That is what he meant by *Ioudaïsmos*. Everything possible had to be done to stamp out a movement that would impede the true purposes of the One God of Israel, whose divine plans Saul and his friends believed were at last on the verge of a glorious fulfillment—until, on the Damascus Road, Saul came to believe that these plans had indeed been gloriously fulfilled, but in a way he had never imagined.

Saul, therefore, poses a double question for the historian in addition to the many questions he poses for students of ancient culture, ancient "religion," or ancient faith. How did he come to be a world changer? He was, we may suppose, a surprising candidate for such a role. He was a teacher of Jewish traditions, perhaps; a reformer, quite possibly. But not the kind of activist who establishes in city after city little cells of unlikely people, many of them non-Jewish, and fires them with a joyful hope that binds them together. Not the kind of philosopher who teaches people not just new thoughts, but a whole new way of thinking. Not the kind of spiritual master who rethinks prayer itself from the ground up. How did it happen? And, beyond the initial impact, why was Paul's movement so successful? Why did these little communities founded by a wandering Jew turn into what became "the church"? That's the first set of questions we are addressing in this book.

The second set gives this a radical twist. How did Saul the persecutor become Paul the Apostle? What sort of transition was that? Was it in any sense a "conversion"? Did Paul "switch religions"? Or can we accept Paul's own account that, in following the crucified Jesus and announcing that Israel's God had raised him from the dead, he was actually being loyal to his ancestral

traditions, though in a way neither he nor anyone else had anticipated?

These questions doubtless puzzled Paul's contemporaries. That would have included other followers of Jesus, some of whom regarded him with deep suspicion. It would have included his fellow Jews, some of whom reacted as violently to him as he himself had to the early Jesus movement. It would certainly have included the non-Jewish population in the cities he went to, many of whom thought he was both mad and dangerous (and a Jew to boot, some would have said with a sneer). Wherever he went, people must have wondered who he was, what he thought he was doing, and what sense it made for a hard-line nationalist Jew to become the founder of multiethnic communities.

These questions do not seem to have puzzled Paul himself, though, as we shall see, he had his own times of darkness. He had thought them through and arrived at robust and sharp-edged answers. But they have continued to challenge readers and thinkers ever since, and they confront in particular a modern world that has been confused about many different aspects of human life, including those sometimes labeled by that tricky word "religion." Paul confronts our world, as he confronted his own, with questions and challenges. This book, a biography of Paul, is an attempt to address the questions. I hope it will also clarify the challenges.

★ ★ ★

These were not the questions that first goaded me into reading Paul seriously for myself. No matter. Once you start reading him, he will lead you to all the other questions soon enough. Studying Paul in my teens with like-minded friends (there were many different styles of cultural rebellion in the 1960s, and I'm glad this was one of mine), I tended to focus on basic theological issues. What precisely was "the gospel," and how did it "work"? What did it mean to be "saved" and indeed to be "justified," and how

might you know that this had happened to you personally? If you were "justified by faith alone," why should it then matter how you behaved thereafter? Or, if you were truly "born again," indwelt by the spirit, oughtn't you now be leading a life of perfect sinlessness? Was there a middle way between these two positions, and if so, how did it make sense? Was faith itself something the individual "did" to gain God's approval, or was that just smuggling in "good works" by the back door? Did Paul teach "predestination," and if so, what might that mean? What about the "spiritual gifts"? Just because Paul spoke in tongues, did that mean we should too? Paul was clearly worried, in his letter to the Galatians, that his converts might get circumcised; granted that none of us felt any pressure in that direction, what was the equivalent in our world? Did it mean that Paul was opposed to all "religious rituals," and if so, what did that say about church life and liturgy and about baptism itself?

These questions swirled around in our eager young minds as we listened to sermons, got involved in church life, and wrestled with the texts. We were reading Paul in the light of fairly typical concerns of some parts of the church in the 1960s and 1970s, but of course what we wanted to know was not what this or that preacher or professor thought, but what Paul himself thought. We believed (in a fairly unreflective manner) in the "authority" of scripture, including Paul's letters. What we were after, therefore, was what Paul himself was trying to say. We were, in other words, trying to do ancient history, though we didn't think of it like that and might have resisted the idea if we had. (This was the more ironic in my case, in that Ancient History was part of my undergraduate degree.) Paul's words, inspired, so we believed, by God, were charged with the grandeur of divine truth, and their meaning was to be sought by prayer and faith rather than by historical inquiry, even though, of course, those words themselves, if one is going to understand them, require careful study precisely of their lexical range in the world of the time.

Paul's letters existed for us in a kind of holy bubble, unaffected

by the rough-and-tumble of everyday first-century life. This enabled us blithely to assume that when Paul said "justification," he was talking about what theologians in the sixteenth century and preachers in the twentieth had been referring to by that term. It gave us license to suppose that when he called Jesus "son of God," he meant the "second person of the Trinity." But once you say you're looking for original meanings, you will always find surprises. History is always a matter of trying to think into the minds of people who think differently from ourselves. And ancient history in particular introduces us to some ways of thinking very different from those of the sixteenth or the twentieth century.

I hasten to add that I still see Paul's letters as part of "holy scripture." I still think that prayer and faith are vital, nonnegotiable parts of the attempt to understand them, just as I think that learning to play the piano for oneself is an important part of trying to understand Schubert's impromptus. But sooner or later, as the arguments go on and people try out this or that theory, as they start reading Paul in Greek and ask what this or that Greek term meant in the first century, they discover that the greatest commentators were standing on the shoulders of ancient historians and particularly lexicographers, and they come, by whatever route, to the questions of this book: who Paul really was, what he thought he was doing, why it "worked," and, within that, what was the nature of the transformation he underwent on the road to Damascus.

★ ★ ★

Another obvious barrier stood between my teenage Bible-reading self and a historical reading of Paul. I assumed without question, until at least my thirties, that the whole point of Christianity was for people to "go to heaven when they died." Hymns, prayers, and sermons (including the first few hundred of my own sermons) all pointed this way. So, it seemed, did Paul: "We are citizens of heaven," he wrote.[3] The language of "salvation" and "glorification," central to Romans, Paul's greatest letter, was assumed to mean the same

thing: being "saved" or being "glorified" meant "going to heaven," neither more nor less. We took it for granted that the question of "justification," widely regarded as Paul's principal doctrine, was his main answer as to how "salvation" worked in practice; so, for example, "Those he justified, he also glorified"[4] meant, "First you get justified, and then you end up in heaven." Looking back now, I believe that in our diligent searching of the scriptures we were looking for correct biblical answers *to medieval questions*.

These were not, it turns out, the questions asked by the first Christians. It never occurred to my friends and me that, if we were to scour the first century for people who were hoping that their "souls" would leave the present material world behind and "go to heaven," we would discover Platonists like Plutarch, not Christians like Paul. It never dawned on us that the "heaven and hell" framework we took for granted was a construct of the High Middle Ages, to which the sixteenth-century Reformers were providing important new twists but which was at best a distortion of the first-century perspective. For Paul and all the other early Christians, what mattered was not "saved souls" being rescued *from* the world and taken to a distant "heaven," but the *coming together* of heaven and earth themselves in a great act of cosmic renewal in which human bodies were likewise being renewed to take their place within that new world. (When Paul says, "We are citizens of heaven," he goes on at once to say that Jesus will come *from* heaven not to take us back there, but *to transform the present world* and us with it.) And this hope for "resurrection," for new bodies within a newly reconstituted creation, doesn't just mean rethinking the ultimate "destination," the eventual future hope. It changes everything on the way as well.

Once we get clear about this, we gain a "historical" perspective in three different senses. First, we begin to see that it matters to try to find out what the first-century Paul was actually talking about over against what later theologians and preachers have assumed he was talking about. As I said, history means thinking

into other people's minds. Learning to read Paul involves more than this, but not less.

Second, when we start to appreciate "what Paul was really talking about," we find that he was himself talking about "history" in the sense of "what happens in the real world," the world of space, time, and matter. He was a Jew who believed in the goodness of the original creation and the intention of the Creator to renew his world. His gospel of "salvation" was about Israel's Messiah "inheriting the world," as had been promised in the Psalms. What God had done in and through Jesus was, from Paul's perspective, the launching of a heaven-and-earth movement, not the offer of a new "otherworldly" hope.

Many skeptics in our own day have assumed that Christianity is irrelevant to the "real world." Many Christians have agreed, supposing that if they are going to insist on the "heavenly" dimension, they have to deny the importance of the "earthly" one. All such split-world theories, however well meaning, miss the point. Though Paul does not quote Jesus's prayer for God's kingdom to come "on earth as in heaven," the whole of his career and thought was built on the assumption that this was always God's intention and that this new heaven-and-earth historical reality had come to birth in Jesus and was being activated by the spirit.

Third, therefore, as far as Paul was concerned, his own "historical" context and setting mattered. The world he lived in was the world into which the gospel had burst, the world that the gospel was challenging, the world it would transform. His wider setting—the complex mass of countries and cultures, of myths and stories, of empires and artifacts, of philosophies and oracles, of princes and pimps, of hopes and fears—this real world was not an incidental backdrop to a "timeless" message that could in principle have been announced by anyone in any culture. When Luke describes Paul engaging with Stoics, Epicureans, and other thinkers in Athens, he is only making explicit what is implicit throughout Paul's letters: that, in today's language, Paul was a

contextual theologian. This doesn't at all mean that we can relativize his ideas ("He said that within his context, but our context is different, so we can push him to one side"). On the contrary. This is where Paul's loyalty to the hope of Israel comes through so strongly. Paul believed that in Jesus the One God had acted "when the fullness of time arrived."[5] Paul saw himself living at the ultimate turning point of history. His announcement of Jesus in *that* culture at *that* moment was itself, he would have claimed, part of the long-term divine plan.

So when we try to understand Paul, we must do the hard work of understanding his context—or rather, we should say, his contexts, plural. His Jewish world and the multifaceted Greco-Roman world of politics, "religion," philosophy, and all the rest that affected in a thousand ways the Jewish world that lived within it are much, much more than simply a "frame" within which we can display a Pauline portrait. Actually, as any art gallery director knows, the frame of a portrait isn't just an optional border. It can make or mar the artist's intention, facilitating appreciation or distracting the eye and skewing the perspective. But with a historical figure like Paul, the surrounding culture isn't even a frame. It is part of the portrait itself. Unless we understand its shape and key features, we will not understand what made Paul tick and why his work succeeded, which is our first main question. And unless we understand Paul's Jewish world in particular, we will not even know how to ask our second question: what it meant for Paul to change from being a zealous persecutor of Jesus's followers to becoming a zealous Jesus-follower himself.

★ ★ ★

The Jewish world in which the young Saul grew up was itself firmly earthed in the soil of wider Greco-Roman culture. As often in ancient history, we know less than we would like to know about the city of Tarsus, Saul's hometown, but we know enough to get the picture. Tarsus, a noble city in Cilicia, ten miles inland

on the river Cydnus in the southeast corner of modern Turkey, was on the major east–west trade routes. (The main landmass we think of today as Turkey was divided into several administrative districts, with "Asia" as the western part, "Asia Minor" as the central and eastern part, "Bithynia" in the north, and so on. I will use the simple, if anachronistic, method of referring to the whole region by its modern name.)

Tarsus could trace its history back two thousand years. World-class generals like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar had recognized its strategic importance; the emperor Augustus had given it extra privileges. It was a city of culture and politics, of philosophy and industry. Among those industries was a thriving textile business, producing material made from goats' hair, used not least to make shelters. This may well have been the basis of the family business, tentmaking, in which Saul had been apprenticed and which he continued to practice. The cosmopolitan world of the eastern Mediterranean, sharing the culture left by Alexander's empire, flowed this way and that through the city. Tarsus rivaled Athens as a center of philosophy, not least because half the philosophers of Athens had gone there a hundred years earlier when Athens backed the wrong horse in a Mediterranean power play and suffered the wrath of Rome. But if the Romans were ruthless, they were also pragmatists. Once it was clear they were in charge, they were happy to make deals.

One deal in particular was struck with the Jews themselves. Everybody else in Saul's day, in regions from Spain to Syria, had to worship the goddess Roma and *Kyrios Caesar,* "Lord Caesar." Augustus Caesar declared that his late adoptive father, Julius Caesar, was now divine, thus conveniently acquiring for himself the title *divi filius,* "son of the deified one," or in Greek simply *huios theou,* "son of god." His successors mostly followed suit. The cults of Roma and the emperor spread in different ways and at different speeds across the empire. In the East, Saul's home territory, they were well established from early on.