

PAUL THE APOSTLE

His Life and Legacy in Their Roman Context

This controversial new biography of the apostle Paul argues for his inclusion in the pantheon of key figures of classical antiquity, along with the likes of Socrates, Alexander the Great, Cleopatra, and Augustus. It first provides a critical reassessment of the apostle's life in its historical context that focuses on Paul's discourse of authority, which was both representative of its Roman context and provocative to his rivals within the Christian movement. It then considers the legend that developed around Paul as the history of his life was elaborated and embellished by later interpreters, creating legends that characterized the apostle variously as a model citizen, an imperial hero, a sexual role model, an object of derision, and an authority to quote from. It is precisely this rewriting of Paul's history into legend that makes the apostle a key transformative figure of classical antiquity.

J. Albert Harrill is Professor of Classics at The Ohio State University. A New Testament scholar, he is the author of *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (2006) and *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (1995). He has contributed to numerous reference works on the Bible and Christianity, and his articles have appeared in such journals as *New Testament Studies*, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, *Studia Patristica*, and *Religion and American Culture*.

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J. Albert Harrill

The Ohio State University



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“That Saint Paul. . . . He’s the one who makes all the trouble.”
– Rinaldi in Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*

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PREFACE

Writing this book has made me rethink what a historical biography of the apostle Paul should be for students and general readers. That intellectual labor has also gone into teaching the course Paul and His Influence in Early Christianity in its multiple versions to hundreds of undergraduates at Indiana, DePaul, and Creighton Universities for nearly twenty years. The fresh, vigorous dialogue in class with such curious minds, at times astonishingly brilliant, has kept my teaching a challenging and lively experience. Rethinking the historical figure of Paul in his context of the Roman Empire continues to sustain my enthusiasm for New Testament studies.

Let me explain briefly what this book is. I aim to bridge the divide between the findings of professional academics and the expectations of a nonacademic audience. I have written strictly as a historian, drawing conclusions about what we can know from the available evidence rather than accepting the truth claims of a religious faith. When reading this book, I suggest keeping at hand a copy of the New Testament so that you can look up the various biblical passages as they arise in the book's analysis. For nonbiblical writings about Paul, Meeks and Fitzgerald (2007) provides an excellent sourcebook and a potential companion volume.

Books on Paul have an astonishing abundance; hundreds have appeared in the last two decades alone. There are bibliographies and reviews of research, comprehensive theological treatments of his life and thought, chronologies and biographies, accessible introductions, anthologies, and reference works. Why another book on Paul? In a word, frustration. I had grown frustrated with the rush of popular books that depict Paul as *the* most important early church leader of his day, even the “second founder” of Christianity (or “Anti-Christ,” after Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous declaration). That romantic notion, which dates to the nineteenth century, lacks historical support. I also find problematic the academic studies known as “Paul and empire” books, which claim to set Paul over against his own

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culture of the ancient Roman world. In their view, Paul outright opposed or otherwise negotiated his way around Roman imperialism in order to subvert and so destroy it. In contrast to such studies, the issue for this book will be to ask different questions: How did Roman culture shape Paul's thinking? What did the rhetoric and theology of his writings mean in their Roman context? How did this context create the apostle's various legacies after his death? I seek to understand the participation and deep implication of Paul's letters in their wider culture, in order to investigate the figure's *Roman* identities in life and legend. This book is, therefore, a critical response to what I find to be seriously misleading claims in recent books on Paul and his historical context.

I also challenge contemporary conceptions of Paul's legend, which continue to have enormous influence on Western culture. *A Farewell to Arms*, the World War I novel by Ernest Hemingway (1929), set in Italy, offers a literary example of this influence. Early in the novel, a notorious grand narrative about Paul arises – the doctrine of Original Sin. (*Original Sin* characterizes the state of every human being to have an inescapable predisposition to moral depravity as a result of Adam's fall.) In a moment of confession to his army chaplain, the American protagonist Frederic Henry expresses his exasperation over his immoral behavior while on leave by paraphrasing a famous line of Paul: "I had drunk much wine and afterward coffee and Strega and I explained, winefully, how we did not do the things we wanted to do; we never did such things" (Hemingway 1929, 13; see Rom. 7:19). Later, his macho alter ego Rinaldi, a carousing Italian army physician, paraphrases another line attributed to Saint Paul (1 Tim. 5:23) to bait this same chaplain into an argument over whether Scripture supports the soldierly habit of drinking. Failing to catch the priest's ire, Rinaldi grouches about the hypocrisy of Paul. Here is the scene:

"Drink some wine, priest," Rinaldi said. "Take a little wine for your stomach's sake. That's Saint Paul, you know."

"Yes I know," said the priest politely. Rinaldi filled his glass.

"That Saint Paul," Rinaldi said. "He's the one who makes all the trouble." The priest looked at me and smiled. I could see that the baiting did not touch him now.

"That Saint Paul," Rinaldi said. "He was a rounder and a chaser and then when he was no longer hot he said it was no good. When he was finished, he made the rules for us who are still hot. Isn't that true, Federico?" (Hemingway 1929, 173)

Paul the Saint, Rinaldi complains, was formerly Paul the Sinner whose words now preach the end of the fun for the rest of us. Through the

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characters of Frederic and Rinaldi, Hemingway thus evokes the most enduring master narrative in the West about Paul – the prototypical religious convert. Such a depiction of Paul endures throughout modern literature, philosophy, and history; it is not unique to Hemingway’s novel.

The following pages will challenge the idea of Original Sin and other grand narratives of the apostle as fictions invented after Paul’s death. The popular portrayal of Paul’s “life story” – from sinning to sainthood, from the Jewish “Saul” to the Christian “Paul” – represents more the legend than history. I thus offer a critical reassessment of Paul and his legacy in Western culture. In the end, I hope that the reader will see that Paul is not the only one making “all the trouble.” The second half of this book surveys the difficulties that ancient interpreters made for one another in the name of Saint Paul.

Many people and institutions have helped me bring this project to fruition, and I offer my humble thanks to them all. The project came at the kind invitation of the classics editor in the New York office of Cambridge University Press. The Alexander von Humboldt Foundation granted a research fellowship at the University of Münster, during which my academic host, Hermut Löhr, introduced me to the unforgettable experience of giving a public lecture in German. Further support came from Indiana University in the forms of a sabbatical, a research supplement leave, and overseas conference grants. As well, a number of academic audiences listened to the ideas presented here; their questions and responses helped me improve and sharpen my arguments in meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and in lectures and colloquia at The Ohio State University, Indiana University, Uppsala University, Humboldt University in Berlin, and University of Münster. Multiple conversations with Karl Galinsky have been particularly helpful for the articulation of my thesis about Paul’s Roman language of authority. Scholars can find in Harrill (2011) more detailed arguments for the points made in Chapter 3; I thank Mohr Siebeck Verlag in Tübingen for permission to reprint and adapt portions of that earlier article. Translations of classical works generally follow those in the Loeb Classical Library, and translations of the Bible from the New Revised Standard Version are altered when not sufficiently literal for my purposes. References cited in Notes and Further Reading give credit to the sources of material borrowed, summarized, or paraphrased in each chapter.

My spouse and historian of ancient Christianity, David Brakke, inspired me to venture beyond my field of Pauline studies into the wider terrain of patristics and late antiquity. Jason BeDuhn offered expert advice on the Manichaeans, as did Stephen J. Shoemaker on the Muslim Paul.

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Bart Ehrman kindly shared a section of his forthcoming monograph on forgery in early Christianity, which informs my discussion of the topic. Paula Fredriksen, my former colleague at Boston University, provided a number of helpful bibliographic suggestions; her historical reconstruction of Paul's apocalyptic hope for Gentiles guides my presentation here. Dale Martin read the entire manuscript in its penultimate stage and offered sage criticism. Susan Gubar and Donald J. Gray, fabulous colleagues in English literature, each read the full work and gave detailed comments on how to reshape it for nonspecialists. I also owe a great debt to Mary Jo Weaver; her generous comments at all stages of my writing encouraged me to realize the project. Last but not least, four Indiana University undergraduates provided feedback on a draft of the manuscript used in class as a trial textbook: Erik Hoffer, Amy Kiray, Russell White, and Samuel Wirt. Shortcomings that remain are, of course, my own.

I dedicate this book to Steven Goldman for his long-standing friendship and wonderful love of learning. Indeed, as he writes in his most recent book, “Learning is one of the best things about being human – that nearly magical ability to collect and use information, to create new knowledge building on old, to receive the abstracted wisdom of people who have gone before us whom we will never meet” (Goldman 2011, 62).

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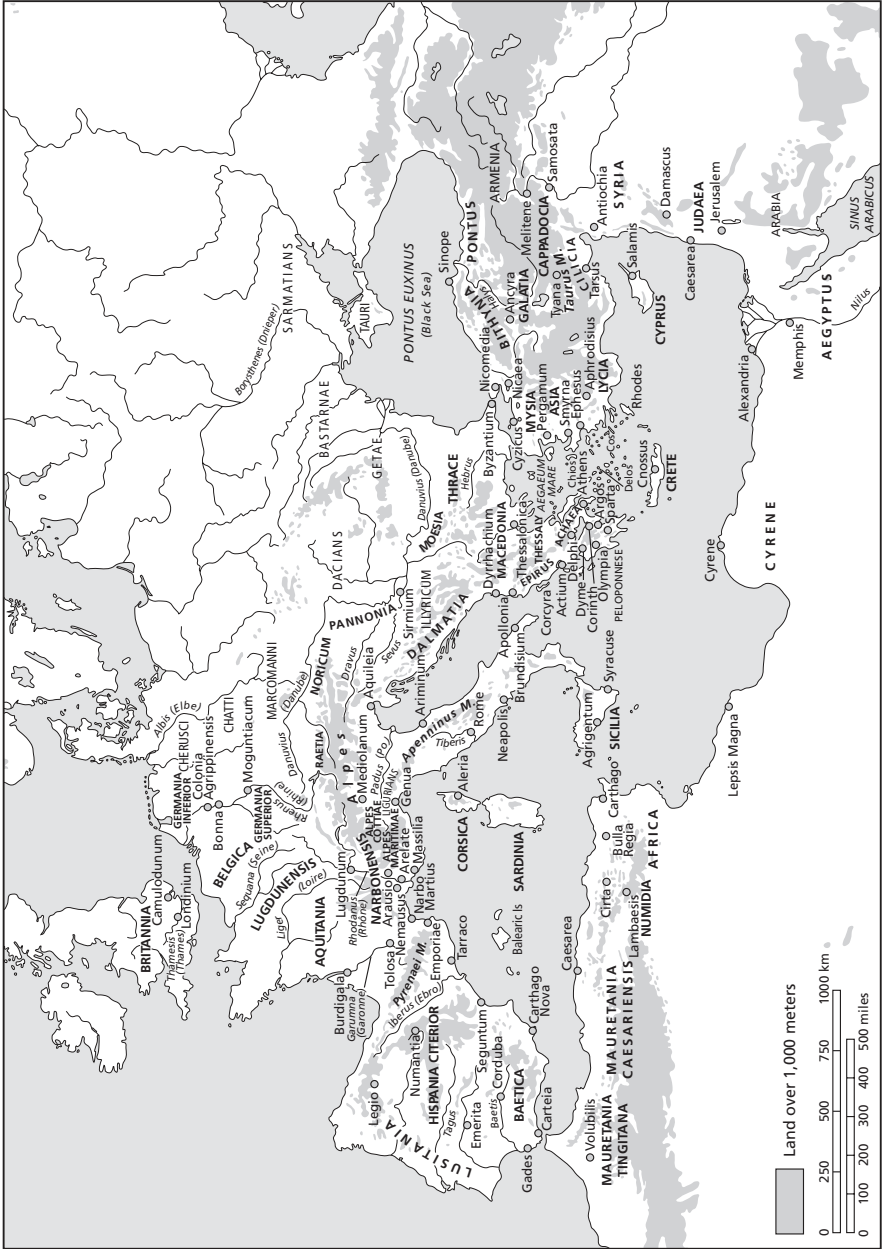


Figure 1. The Roman World. Paul's early career centered in Damascus and Antioch (Antiochia), both in Roman Syria.