

*Paul, His Story*

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor

New York: Oxford University Press, 2004

Review by Tom Dykstra

This is the story of an apostle who “had few scruples about the way he attacked those who disagreed with him.” Paul was “less than honest” when it came to presenting his credentials in the most forceful way to others, and his “lack of empathy” for other people caused him to attribute “the most uncharitable explanation” for any opposition to him. His “tunnel vision” and “self-absorption” were so intense that he did not care about anyone or anything peripheral to his central vision. He showed “contempt” for those who disagreed with him and in fighting them wrote “brutal slashes,” threw “tantrums,” displayed “childishness,” was “manipulative,” employed “moral blackmail,” and engaged at times in a “cruel intellectual game,” “cruel laughter,” and “sarcasm.” There can be no doubt that “Paul’s venom certainly diminished him in the eyes of the genuine Christians in the community.” The hostility he attracted was not due only to his theology, but rather “[h]is own character traits were also a significant factor.” Indeed, his personality impelled him to magnify conflict rather than resolve it in a positive manner: disagreeing with Paul was like waving a “red rag to a bull. Opposition goaded him.” (59, 110, 136, 145, 146, 151, 166, 167, 180, 185, 220)

Saint Paul hardly appears saintly in this portrayal, if that has anything to do with practicing what he preaches in 1 Corinthians 13. Murphy-O'Connor writes off all the less-than-admirable behavior as just a “few character flaws” (191), but one cannot escape the impression that the Paul of this story is a quite unpleasant, opinionated, and even abusive fellow. He evokes Vladimir Lenin rather than Mother Theresa. The reader who finds the story convincing may well wonder if Jesus’ condemnation of Pharisees in Matthew was in fact an oblique reference to Paul himself, the Pharisee founder of Gentile Christianity: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice.” (23:2-3)

The outline of Paul’s life is drawn primarily from his epistles and supplemented by data from Acts. Murphy-O'Connor accepts as genuine not only those epistles commonly deemed such but also Colossians and 2 Timothy, which he uses extensively. He also relies heavily on his own analysis of the commonly accepted epistles, treating 1 Thessalonians as a conflation of two epistles, and Philippians as composed of three. The author also brings to bear a lifetime of research into Paul’s world, and he weaves into this text his vast knowledge of what was indeed typical of, and relevant to, Paul’s life in the first century Roman world. He integrates all of this information in order to postulate not just a an outline of what Paul said and did and where he went, but also the inner emotions he felt and the motivations that drove him at significant points in the story.

Few other books outside of historical novels give the reader such a first-hand feel for aspects of Paul’s environment such as what it was really like for him to travel by foot or

by sea. In addition, this story forces the reader to see Paul as an ordinary human being subject to emotions like the rest of us in a much more effective way than the typical scholarly treatment does. Seeing Paul in this light can lead to new perspectives on the meaning of the texts he produced, and for this reason it is a book that anyone interested in understanding Paul can benefit from.

The book's genre is difficult to characterize. It is not a typical biography, and it is not meant to be a fictional "story." It is a unique attempt to render Paul's life in the form of a "story" while remaining in the realm of nonfiction. The author expressly intends to avoid "slipping into the genre of the historical novel":

I have not created highly *specific* situations or imagined dialogue. ... To go into such specific detail, I feel, would be illegitimate use of historical imagination in this sort of book, because no control is possible. The *typical* is another matter entirely. One first-century boat, road or inn was very much like another, and we have a mass of contemporary data on which to base a vivid picture of a voyage, a journey or a night at an inn. In such instances, the imagination is under tight control. It is inventive only to the extent that it generalizes and colours individual historical experiences. (ix)

Murphy-O'Connor also deems it a justifiable use of "historical imagination" to describe specific emotions known situations would have engendered. If Paul knew that his converts needed his leadership but he was unable to go to them, then "To say that frustration and apprehension ate at [Paul's] ... soul is legitimate interpretation, not gratuitous imagining." (viii-ix)

The plan sounds promising but the execution is in several ways disappointing. Very much of what the author appears to consider "legitimate interpretation" or "legitimate use of historical imagination" would be termed sheer speculation by many historians. Even parts of the book that purport to present historical fact often rely on highly questionable analysis of the primary sources. And while the book does recount many emotions and motivations in its attempt to present the human face of the apostle, it fails to explain – or even try to explain -- the links between Paul's personality and his message.

The ability of any historian to accurately divine a historical personage's emotional states based on imprecise and uncertain knowledge of specific situations, human relationships, and the inner life of the person himself is questionable at best. Such attempts are by their nature speculative. In addition, the book does not follow through on the promise to restrict "historical imagination" to the "typical" rather than the "specific." For example, 2 Timothy is expanded into an entire chapter recounting quite specific situations as well as emotions. Representative of the author's technique is the way Paul's statement "Erastus remained at Corinth" in 4:20 is extrapolated into an entire paragraph:

The fire lit in Erastus by Paul's initial urgency and daring died slowly as the ship made its way to Corinth. The voyage without distractions gave him time to reflect on what it might mean for him to go to Rome where Christians were being tortured for their faith. His imagination gradually eroded his courage. When they finally docked at Cenchræa, the eastern port of Corinth, he dismally told Paul that he did not have the strength to go any further. He and his family would remain faithful to the end if a persecution arose in his own city, but he could not put his head in the lion's mouth by going to Rome. (227-8)

Similarly, despite the absence of any direct evidence that Paul was ever married, Murphy-O'Connor suggests that the apostle's persecution of Christians was "an outlet for repressed anger at the loss of his wife and children." (18-19) It is true that for a man to have been married in Paul's world may well have been "typical." But there is an incredibly wide range of possible explanations for Paul's unmarried status as presented in his epistles, and a wide range of possible emotional responses to each of them.

Many of the book's reconstructions have a more solid base in the sources than these. For example, Murphy-O'Connor quite reasonably asserts that "The assurance of his adept use of rhetorical devices can only be the fruit of long study and practice. There can be little doubt that he was brought up in a socially privileged class, which he was formed to adorn." But all too often the assertions venture far into the realm of pure speculation, and they generally do so with no acknowledgement of that fact. Throughout, we are told in the confidently certain voice of a novelist what definitely happened, even when the sources themselves are contradictory or silent. Verbal circumlocutions such as "maybe," "probably," "most likely," and so forth are rare. The book frequently reads like a historical novel that contains summaries of conversations instead of direct quotations. As such, it fails to provide either the measured judgment one expects of a history book or the vivid picture of reality woven around a captivating plot that good historical fiction would provide.

Even when the author stays close to his sources, his analysis of historical reality is often questionable. For example, his use of Acts is somewhat inconsistent. He warns that "close analysis" of the first missionary journey in Acts makes it "impossible to accord it any real confidence" and that aspects of Paul's life anywhere in that book should be taken as "reflecting Luke's purpose rather than historical reality." (44, 54) Yet he accepts as reliable much from Luke that is not corroborated in the epistles. An example is his conclusion that Paul's "final position on the Law was to be that Jewish converts to Christianity should not be permitted to obey it (Acts 21:21)." (44; see also 115) Throughout the book a large number of statements about Paul depend directly on the lone mention in Acts of his profession as a tentmaker.

Despite his critical stance toward Acts, Murphy-O'Connor seems to take it for granted that the gospels are generally reliable accounts of who Jesus was and what he said and did, and that Paul himself learned and repeated the teachings of Jesus. Paul sought out Peter because "... Peter could answer any questions about Jesus that Paul wanted to ask." (33)

Paul is the hero of Murphy-O'Connor's story in spite of all his foibles because he accurately receives, understands, and repeats Jesus' teachings. For this aspect of the story of Paul's life the attempt to see Paul as a human being is in effect abandoned. Where his theology is concerned, he is not a human being whose personality shapes his thinking and actions; he is instead strictly a conduit for ideas that originate in perfection from Jesus and are passed on in perfection.

The essence of the teaching that Paul faithfully passes on is antinomianism. Paul made a heroic effort against all odds to establish a religion in which each person is expected at all times to judge for himself or herself what obeying the God of Love entails, rather than relying on any Law or laws, even such as might be expressed by the authoritative apostle himself:

Paul, in other words, is careful to avoid imposing strictly moral judgments, but has no hesitation in making administrative decisions. The latter concern purely practical matters, whereas the former involve interpersonal relations, which are of the essence of Christian life. On basic moral issues Paul is prepared only to offer advice, 'I say this for your advantage, not to lay any restraint upon you'" (118).

In Murphy-O'Connor's view the apostle's epistles consistently reveal "just how radical was Paul's antinomian stance":

He would not give obedience to any law, and he would not exact submission from his converts to any precept, be it from God, Jesus, or himself. In consequence, he was strictly limited in his guidance of the community. He could indicate what he expected of its members. He could attempt to persuade them to modify their behavior. He could propose his own example ... But that was all! ... his experience at Antioch had taught Paul that to operate through binding precepts would necessarily bring him and his converts back into the orbit of the Law.

Murphy-O'Connor sees this as the essential difference between Paul and his opponents. The latter were offering a version of Christianity that relieved people of the responsibility to think about and decide moral issues for themselves. It promised that if they would obey specific, written directives they could avoid uncertainty and have peace of mind (132).

Paul's primary interest in inner transformation over blind obedience, which also explains his lack of interest in theology per se:

Paul's preaching was minimalist. He proclaimed a crucified Christ as the exemplar of authentic humanity (1 Cor 2:1-5), and saw no need for any speculative theological development. He was more concerned with evidence of the power of transforming grace in his life and that of others (2 Cor 3:2). (160)

This vision of Christianity apparently corresponds exactly with that of Murphy-O'Connor himself. In the final paragraph of this story, the storyteller offers the ultimate revelation of his text's meaning by lamenting that subsequent Christians misunderstood Paul and misused his epistles and never implemented his bright vision of Christianity's potential:

Such accuracy and insight should give us confidence in the solutions that he proposed in order to make Christianity an authentic instrument of change. It is not that the Pauline version of Christianity has failed, it has never been seriously tried." (239)

The assertion that Paul's version of Christianity "has never been seriously tried" is an amazingly far-reaching statement. It appears to assume that no substantial group of Christians anywhere ever understood Paul's antinomianism, which suggests to this reviewer that the author may not be very familiar with Eastern Christianity. The book's

Epilogue also offers an explanation for why Paul's version of Christianity was not adopted:

The communities that Paul founded needed perhaps a generation to shake themselves free of his overwhelming background presence. Then they began to come to a true appreciation of his importance. This showed itself in a renewed appreciation of his letters. ... Thus communities carefully conserved what they had received, and requested those that he had sent to other churches. (236)

This statement alludes to the fact that throughout his book Murphy O'Connor presents Paul as an unsavory character. As can be seen from the quotations amassed for the opening paragraph of this review, Paul is presented throughout the book as an unscrupulous megalomaniac opportunist who was incapable of empathy for others. He was the sort of person who might win a theological debate by means of skillful use of rhetoric or political maneuvering, but he would leave a bad taste in peoples' mouths after walking all over them. Thus, he built up resentment against himself and could not win people's hearts.

The idea expressed here that Paul's personality was an impediment to the success of his message highlights a serious tension that appears throughout the book yet is never addressed explicitly. There is a sharp contrast between Paul's unsavory personality on the one hand and his theological "accuracy and insight" on the other. Many readers will leave the book wondering how it can be that a person who was unscrupulous and incapable of empathy for others could be a paragon of theological insight, how such a person's personality could fail to inform his theological ideas in some way.