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Paul: A Biography (Book Review)

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Those who read N.T. Wright's *Paul: A Biography* will expand their encounter with the Apostle himself. In his excellent overview of Paul's life and work, Wright, a retired Anglican bishop and Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at St. Andrews, as well as a prolific author of over twenty books on Christianity, not only encourages but also equips people to read Paul and the entire Scriptures with attentive hearts and informed minds. Wright also leads his readers into dialogue with other scholars, both past and present.

Regarding Wright's dialogue with other scholars, he regularly contrasts his view of Paul and the Gospel with other views of these subjects rooted in various scholarly traditions, including the Middle Ages, traditional Reformation-era thinking, modern liberal scholarship, and contemporary evangelical piety. In making those contrasts, Wright does bring out some important biblical truths, but he does not offer a full or fair depiction of opposing views. For example, in discussing his own evangelical adolescence, Wright distances himself from "looking for correct biblical answers to medieval questions" about salvation in terms of heaven and hell (8; emphasis Wright's). Fair enough, I suppose; but for those seeking true and deep insights into the Middle Ages or the Reformation, Wright is not the best guide. And, of course, Wright's goal is not to introduce us to Dante, Luther, or similar Pauline-inspired Christians, past or present.

Instead, Wright begins his biography of Paul with a preface in which he states his goal of "searching for the man behind the texts" (xi). To carry out his search for Paul, Wright proceeds not psychologically but historically. He recognizes that "human beings are deep wells of mystery" (42); so, in effect, he concedes that we will never achieve a perfect or exhaustive understanding of Paul. But he does illumine Paul's life by placing the apostle in the context of various ancient social movements, narratives, and symbols from the first century AD. For example, Wright explores Paul's Jewish upbringing in Tarsus as connecting him to "the multifaceted Greco-Roman world of politics, 'religion,' philosophy, and all the rest that affected" Paul and other Jews of his time (10). In that complex context, Paul winds up proclaiming the inherited hope of Israel in a radical new way, one that changes the world then and now. Not surprisingly, Wright

relates Paul's world-changing influence to the life-changing experience Paul had while on his way to persecute followers of Jesus. In order to offer insight into not only ancient history but our world today, Wright asks, "What exactly happened on the road to Damascus?" (2).

Before offering exegetical insights into Acts 9, Galatians 1, and other passages that deal with Paul's change of mind on the Damascus Road, Wright finds it necessary to offer definitions for significant words such as "conversion," "Judaism," and "religion." Wright fears that, without historically contextualized definitions of such words, readers of the New Testament will retroject contemporary usages of these words into Paul's message. Wright states that "if we approach matters in that way we will, quite simply, never understand either Saul of Tarsus or Paul the Apostle" (3). Therefore, he presents Paul's conversion not as a departure from the religion of Judaism in order to enter the different religion of Christianity but, rather, as a radical reorientation of Paul's relationship to Jesus himself, which leads him to offer a Jewish message with a new and unexpected fulfillment in Jesus. Wright also presents "religion" itself not as a set of individual beliefs separated from society and politics but, rather, as "God-related activities that, along with politics and community life, held a culture together" (3). And he defines "Judaism" as referring "not to a 'religion,' but to an *activity*: the zealous propagation and defense of the ancestral way of life" (3-4; emphasis Wright's).

With such contextualized understandings of key concepts, Wright then goes on to describe Paul's Jewish upbringing, along with his transformation from persecutor to preacher of Christ. Wright discusses Paul's need to ponder his experience of Jesus in relation to Paul's own family and vocation. In the first major section of his biography, entitled "Part One: Beginnings," Wright offers fascinating and fruitful commentary regarding Paul's violent "zeal" in relation to the biblical stories of Phinehas and Elijah, Paul's "faith" as an expression of loyalty to Jesus as the fulfillment of Judaism, and Paul's face-to-face encounter with Jesus as related to the hope of Israel in general and the vision of Ezekiel 1-3 in particular. Wright then builds on that narrative to offer informed theories regarding the ten years or so after Paul's Damascus-Road revelation. By the end of

Part One of his book, Wright has begun to explore Paul's mission journey with Barnabas, and for any preacher or teacher of Paul, Wright's biography offers a wealth of stimulating material, whether his readers agree with him completely or not. Wright makes scholarly research accessible to non-scholars involved in churches, classrooms, or self-study.

In the next section of his biography, "Part Two: Herald of the King," Wright works with both Luke's portrait of Paul in Acts and Paul's own epistles in order to portray the Apostle as proclaiming Jesus as the true King or Emperor of the world (in contrast to the contemporaneous claims of Caesar as God). According to Wright, Christ, by defeating the powers of darkness on the cross, brings about "a new way of being human" (109). Wright also contrasts the inhumane idolatry of the Roman Empire with the unimaginably unexpected fulfillment of justice in Judaism by the one true God in Jesus Christ. According to Wright, Christ, by his Spirit, forms "a new *polis*, a new city or community, right in the heart of the existing system" (106), and as Paul brings that subversive message to cities in the Roman Empire, he becomes "the target of scorn, anger, and violence" (113). Wright sums up Paul's message with what he calls "a technical phrase—*radical messianic eschatology*" (130), and he goes on to explain these and other terms in ways helpful to both advanced and beginning scholars.

Wright also provides an admittedly speculative portrait of Paul's message and suffering in relation to 2nd Corinthians, and in that section he provides one of the chief treasures of this biography. According to Wright, Paul perhaps suffered "an Ephesian imprisonment" that was "the location of [his] Prison Letters," a theory that makes "excellent sense of the [extant] historical, theological, and biographical data" (xii). In Wright's imagined scenario, Paul's enemies in Ephesus managed to get him imprisoned, and that led Paul into "a dark tunnel, the tunnel between the cheerful Paul of 1 Corinthians and the crushed, battered Paul of 2 Corinthians" (263). In Wright's view, Paul possibly suffered regular beatings and almost certainly suffered from cold and hunger. In those hardships, Paul experienced what amounted to "various kinds of mental and physical torture" (266). Wright speculates that, during his time of despair, Paul seemed temporarily to lose his trust in Christ; but as he persevered in his Jesus-shaped Jewish prayers, he became "like a plant in a harsh winter" (268). More keenly aware of his own limits and weaknesses, Paul became all the more effective in

his witness to "the victory of God and the lordship of Jesus." And here again, anyone wanting to preach, teach, or read Paul will find invaluable insights, even apart from perfect agreement. As an example of Wright's preach-able, teach-able statements, note his claim that "Christology and therapy go well together, even if, like Jacob, an apostle may limp, in style and perhaps also in body, after the dark night spent wrestling with the angel" (269).

In the remainder of Part Two, Wright provides further material regarding Paul as a loyal Jew, whose hope, mission, and life are radically reshaped by Jesus. Relying on the book of Acts to an extent many other scholars of Paul do not, Wright presents Paul in terms not in keeping with "modern European Protestantism" but as someone whose actions can make him seem "so 'Catholic'—or so Jewish!" (230).

Then, in "Part Three: The Sea, The Sea," Wright builds on Luke's testimony in Acts 27-28, in order to offer "Two possible scenarios, very different from one another" about what may have happened to Paul after the time of his arrival in Rome, which, in Wright's chronology, took place in AD 62 (391). Wright briefly sketches the common theory that Paul was killed after two years imprisonment in Rome, during "the persecution of Christians that followed the great fire of Rome in AD 64" (392). Wright then explores a different and fascinating theory. In line with a testimony that goes back to Clement of Rome (of the late 1st century), Wright argues for the possibility that Paul was released from his initial imprisonment in Rome and was able to do mission work: either in Asia Minor and contingent areas or as far west as Spain. In that case, Paul may actually have written the so-called "Pastoral Letters"—1st Timothy, 2nd Timothy, and Titus—which many scholars dispute. Wright confesses that this theory can only be held tentatively, and he concludes this section of his work by stating that "Paul had to live with a good many 'perhaps' clauses in his life. Maybe it's fitting that his biographers should do so as well" (397).

In the final chapter of his book, "The Challenge of Paul," Wright reviews what Paul did and explores why the apostle, "despite everything, seems to have been so effective" (399). While acknowledging that Paul would give all the praise and credit to Jesus, Wright describes Paul as a public figure who teaches us how to think and how to love. He notes Paul's energy, his honesty, and his "affections for his churches" (418). Wright also gives eloquent expression to his interpretation of Paul's "vision of a larger united though diverse world," through which

we can receive inspiration to seek “a refreshingly new kind of human society” (423).

Wright concludes his biography with a powerful, albeit imagined, portrait of Paul’s final hours in this life. Bringing Paul alongside the Greek martyr Socrates and the Jewish martyr Rabbi Akiba, Wright envisions Paul surrounded by friends and awaiting his executioner. As Paul prays with “Jewish-style loyalty [and] Messiah-shaped loyalty” to the one true God revealed in the one Lord Jesus, he sacrifices his life for

“not just ‘a religion’ but a new kind of humanity—a new people, a new community, a new world. A new *polis*. A new kind of love” (431). Wright imagines Paul’s final prayer and whole life as resulting in things that Paul “could hardly have imagined,” and in this way Wright encourages his readers as well to give all our love and our whole lives to serve God’s plan for a new creation “abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20).

The Comfort Bird. Hylke Speerstra. Originally published in the Frisian language as *De Treastfugel*. Translated by Henry Baron. Niagara Falls, NY: Mokeham Publishing Company, 2017. 117 pages. Reviewed by Dr. James C. Schaap, Emeritus Professor of English, Dordt University.

I’ve been to Terschelling, a North Sea island just off the Dutch coast—well, as some would have it said, the Frisian coast. On the island, I’ve biked down narrow roads my Schaap ancestors must have traveled themselves. I’ve walked on beaches they had to have known very well. I have a picture of a house family lore claims was, once upon a time, theirs—which is to say, ours.

But I don’t know how those Schaaps lived before they came to America. I know they weren’t rich. I know they held exacting definitions of what the Christian faith required of them and others, definitions that drew them apart from a goodly number of their neighbors. They left “the old country,” I’m told, for reasons they would have noted to be, first of all, religious. But, I have no doubt they were poor and sad—they’d lost three children.

What I know and what I don’t may explain why I found *The Comfort Bird*, by Hylke Speerstra, so fascinating—more than that, so enlightening and moving. Speerstra, a highly-regarded Dutch writer, wrote *The Comfort Bird* in his native Frisian language, about men and women who seem familiar—even familial. I could bike up the road to the township cemetery right now and find most of the Speerstra’s characters’ names.

In a profound and even unsettling way, *The Comfort Bird* is my story. My Schaap ancestors went to South Dakota just as one of the book’s families, the Hiemstras, did, believing a Dakota they could only have imagined to be the promised land. When grinding poverty once again left the Schaaps little choice, they moved, this time east, as did the Hiemstras.

In the last twenty years, I’ve read a few library shelves full of books about 19th-century life in the

Upper Midwest, from *Giants in the Earth* to *Black Elk Speaks*. *The Comfort Bird* is something new, peopled with characters very much like my own ancestors, very much kin to the founding generations of Dordt College, now University.

But *The Comfort Bird* isn’t simply a Dutch or Frisian story. It’s a very human story.

In Friesland, when prices drop beneath the cost of production, when there is simply no more money and little sustenance, Grandma Ytske bakes extra bread and takes to the streets to peddle it, only to discover she’s not alone: “In one year, the number of bread peddlers has doubled. Besides, it seems as if there are only Dutch Reformed bakery goods in her basket. Her honey bread may be the best, but the Secessionists, the Mennonites, the Catholics stick to their own tastes” (32).

Her husband sees no way out of their poverty, but Ytske is struck with what she imagines America promises. When he tells her joyously that their only cow will calve, Ytske tells him it’s the “the golden calf.” She refuses to believe God wants them to stay in Friesland and lets her husband know her conviction has come to her in a vision:

Through Him, I was shown a moment ago the path to a world without troubles. I have to take Sibbele aside again and present my vision of this night; this time I’ll get him to go as our pioneer to America, like the oldest son of King Hezekiah who was sent ahead to the other side of the ocean. (33)

When her husband won’t hear of emigration, she tells him, “You have to trust me and the Lord, Hizkia” (33).

Ytske’s burning desire for the unending possibilities the new land holds eventually wins out,