Peter Frick, ed.

Paul in the Grip of the Philosophers: The Apostle and Contemporary Continental Philosophy

Paul in Critical Contexts


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Paul in the Grip of the Philosophers adds another volume to the ever-expanding library of work devoted to contemporary theorists and Paul. As is the case with many—but thankfully not all—studies in this vein, Paul in the Grip of the Philosophers is an all-male enterprise: ten (white) male scholars, excluding the editor, also a white male, writing about ten (white) male thinkers. It is not simply a matter of the lack of diversity among theorists writing on Paul; the fact that Walter Benjamin, and to some extent even Jacques Derrida, treated here, do not engage Paul very directly (or at all) has not prevented their inclusion alongside Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, and others who do. So why not a chapter, just as a for instance, on Judith Butler’s reflections on subject formation, in conversation with Badiou’s Paul? Something along these lines would have been welcome. In fairness, editor Peter Frick notes that he attempted unsuccessfully to solicit contributions from women scholars (in order to let us hear “the voice of an other” [13 n. 18]). Readers may rue this volume’s lack of ethnic and gender diversity, even if the problem is, ultimately, one facing the subfield it represents more generally.

But let me hasten to add that in many ways this is an excellent volume, highly diverse as a collection of perspectives and voices. In fact, it is something of an unruly collection, which is a definite value. The book’s ominous title suggests that what follows might entail
wresting Paul from the philosophers’ grip. Peter Frick’s introduction contributes to this impression, and his concerns are echoed in his contribution on Nietzsche, the first chapter in the volume. Nietzsche famously accuses Paul of inventing Christianity to resolve his own (petty) psychological predicament regarding Torah. But when it comes to sin, Frick avers, Nietzsche and Paul are closer than one might expect, because Nietzsche, like Paul, acknowledges the pervasiveness of sin, albeit as a cultural concept. As interesting as the suggestion is as a way of thinking differently about Nietzsche’s response to Paul, Frick nevertheless seems unwilling to bracket his theological investments in order to think Nietzsche alongside Paul—which is the move most of his contributors would have made at this point.

Many of the contributions to the volume provide so thorough an introduction to the philosopher under discussion that anyone, not merely students of Paul, will gain from reading them. Such is the case with the second chapter, Benjamin Crowe’s essay on Heidegger. The core focus here is Heidegger’s early work on Paul, in lectures from 1920–1921 that were published posthumously in German 1995 and in English in 2004 as *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*. Remarking that “Paul’s letters … provide the outline for what Heidegger takes to be an authentic manner of existence” (49), Crowe explores the ways in which Heidegger’s mature thought has roots in his early reflections on Paul while also signaling the basic impetus behind the appropriation of Paul in all the subsequent thinkers discussed here.

Chapter 3, Roland Boer’s highly idiosyncratic “Paul of the Gaps: Agamben, Benjamin and the Puppet Player,” focuses less on Giorgio Agamben’s reading of Paul (for that, see ch. 8) than on Agamben’s claims, in the last section of the latter’s *The Time That Remains*, to have discovered the Pauline basis of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Boer skewers Agamben with panache: “Each step of his argument creaks with both the heart-stopping leap of potential insight and the dangers of the thinnest of ropes on which to rely should the leap fail” (62). Given the tone of the piece, it comes as no surprise that in Boer’s view Agamben’s argument fails to convince.

Larry Welborn’s “Jacob Taubes—Paulinist, Messianist” (ch. 4) also concerns Walter Benjamin, as it happens. Welborn’s excellent review of Taubes’s intellectual engagement with Carl Schmitt, at the core of Taubes’s *Political Theology of Paul*, becomes a skeptical search for a more relevant background. Taubes did not, in Welborn’s view, forge his reading of Paul the revolutionary as a result of dialogue with Schmitt but rather in conversation with Benjamin’s “Theologico-Political Fragment.” Welborn makes a convincing case in this fine chapter, even if in doing so this chapter, like others, veers away from the genre of straight-ahead introduction.
Chapter 5, Hans Ruin’s essay on Derrida, rightly notes that the scope of Derrida’s actual reflections upon Paul or Pauline texts is limited. Ruin discusses Derridean deconstruction (eventually as it pertains to religious questions), providing some useful background on Nietzsche and Heidegger along the way, before focusing on two texts in which Derrida explicitly mentions Paul. The first involves reflection on the universalism of Paul’s message, specifically in the context of his comments on circumcision (e.g., Rom 2:25). The second concerns the veiling passage in 1 Cor 11.

The next chapter, Anthony Sciglitano’s piece on Gianni Vattimo, like Ruin’s essay, concerns a thinker whose specific reflections on Paul are limited. In fact, the only citation of an authentic Pauline text in Vattimo, according to Sciglitano, is from Phil 2:5–11 (he also cites Hebrews and Ephesians). But Sciglitano shows how Pauline concepts such as *kenosis* and *agape* are also key to Vattimo’s thought.

Chapter 7, on Badiou, written by Frederiek Depoortere, is a focused reading of core elements of Badiou’s *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Depoortere provides a relatively minimal overview of Badiou’s work more generally, but in focusing on—and, indeed, criticizing—Pauline universalism, as understood by Badiou, in terms of contemporary scholarship (by Boyarin among others), he nicely establishes a space for the philosopher in Pauline studies.

“Agamben’s Paul: Thinker of the Messianic,” by Alain Gignac (ch. 8), returns the volume once again to the Italian thinker Giorgio Agamben. Gignac’s survey of Agamben’s career is excellent. The chapter combines a careful reading of *The Time That Remains*, Agamben’s “commentary” on Romans, with a set of brief sections showing how Agamben “puts to the test several established theological certainties” pertaining to the law, Christian identity, Christology, and more.

The last chapters are best read as conclusions to the volume. Chapter 9 is, ostensibly, yet another contributor’s essay on a philosopher, in this case Žižek. But Ward Blanton’s “Mad with the Love of Undead Life: Understanding Paul and Žižek,” is far more capacious than that. Much of it concerns a variety of Lacanian interventions in Pauline studies, Žižek’s included. The final segment is a thoroughly enjoyable reading of Žižek’s career trajectory in terms of Paul’s own story. But Blanton also writes pointedly about the long history of philosophical Paulinisms, the better to undermine the ongoing defensiveness on the part of contemporary New Testament scholars anxious about their “disciplinary property rights” (196). Neil Elliott takes a similar tack in chapter 10, “The Philosophers’ Paul and the Churches.” His claim is that thinkers such as Badiou and Žižek, despite their location without the church, offer a far more radical perspective for Christian reflection and action than even the most left-leaning Anglo-American
theologians. The latter, Elliott warns, are complicit in the capitalist enterprise, commodifying (under the banner of tolerance) identities rather than challenging the larger system. Elliott is consonant with Žižek and Badiou especially on this point, even if one laments the way this version of the particularity-universality argument can seem to leave precious little room for the radical potential of minority social perspectives.

Several of the contributors to the volume seem to take seriously what the book’s back cover implies about its purpose: “this collection of leading scholars makes accessible a discussion often elusive to those not already conversant in the categories of European philosophy.” Others probably only render the debates more elusive, since they are already so thoroughly engaged in that discourse. Further, nearly all are better characterized as interventions than introductions, even when they are also useful introductions. Students and readers unfamiliar with Nietzsche and company will learn a great deal from this volume, I am sure, but it is bound to be much more appealing to those already familiar with the thinkers and works in question. The conversational dimension of the collection (we listen in as various scholars debate the merits of Agamben on Paul, for example) is an added bonus. More of the contributors could have taken a lesson from Sciglitano (and, to a lesser extent, Depoortere and Blanton) and drawn attention to the supersessionist implications of the philosophers’ Paul. Nevertheless, the quality of the work included in this collection makes Paul in the Grip of the Philosophers a worthy addition to that ever-expanding library.