

BOOK REVIEW

Thomas E. Phillips, *Paul, his Letters, and Acts* (Library of Pauline Studies; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009). xii + 243 pp. Pbk. US\$24.99.

It is not uncommon in today's information age to find authors apologizing to their readers for contributing still more to the already overwhelming amount of literature that is already available on a particular subject. The inevitable justifications that follow such apologies usually cite something that is novel about the author's specific contribution. In the case of *Paul, his Letters, and Acts*, however, Thomas Phillips explicitly denies any pretensions toward novelty. His goal is to summarize and review both primary evidence and prior scholarship.

As Phillips clearly states in his introduction, two main questions guide the book. 'To what degree are the Paul of Acts and the Paul of the letters the same character, and to what degree are the Paul of Acts and the Paul of the letters two distinct—and perhaps incongruous—characters?' (p. 1). Since these overarching questions require that we know something about 'the Paul of Acts' and 'the Paul of the letters', a great deal of the book is taken up with the portraits of Paul presented by these two sources. An important concern for Phillips is that prior judgments be avoided during this foundational investigation, particularly those of the kind that seize upon something in Acts in order to explain something in the letters or vice versa. Such judgments have a proper place, of course, but Phillips advises that they be deferred until some initial conclusions have been established. One must create rough sketches of Paul from within Acts or from within the letters, and only then compare and contrast those sketches in order to produce a more detailed portrait. Many scholars who have not approached Paul in this way have either 'uncritically blended' two distinct portraits or 'so deliberately cordoned [them] off from one another that they have never been compared in a careful and disciplined way' (pp. 1-2). Such scholars are in error, and Phillips hopes to help them see this.

The initial two chapters survey the general state of scholarship. Chapter 1 presents two ‘plausible Pauls’ (p. 6), one described by Bruce Chilton in his book *Rabbi Paul*, the other described by John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed in *In Search of Paul*. Scholars already familiar with the two books will find little of interest in Phillips’s summary of their work. Scholars who have opinions about one or the other may also find the tone of Phillips’s discussion uncomfortably non-committal if not downright wishy-washy. This awkward departure from the normal register of academic discourse is necessitated by the fact that the actual content of the two books is entirely incidental to Phillips’s real agenda, which is to illustrate the underlying methodological choices that push these two scholarly projects towards dramatically different conclusions about the Apostle Paul. To anyone already engaged in Pauline studies, it will come as no surprise that the primary culprit is ‘the respective authors’ decisions about the role that the book of Acts will play as evidence in their reconstructions of Paul’ (p. 27). After all, even when the Pauline letters are given undisputed priority, a stance must be taken concerning the historicity of Acts. Chilton leans toward Acts, whereas Crossan and Reed lean away from Acts. But this has produced an Apostle Paul who suffers a kind of ‘dual personality’ (p. 28) in biblical scholarship, sometimes looking very much like the Paul of Acts and sometimes looking very different. According to Phillips, ‘the image of Paul that leans away from Acts is becoming increasingly prominent in critical scholarship’ (p. 2).

The emergence of Paul’s ‘dual personality’ within biblical scholarship is the main concern of Chapter 2. Phillips describes it in two steps. First step: F.C. Baur and his skepticism about the historicity of Acts. Second step: John Knox and Philipp Vielhauer and their arguments concerning Pauline chronology and Pauline theology. Phillips is not inclined at this point to praise or condemn these developments, but he does want to embrace the methodological caution they have forced upon Pauline scholars. Things are not as simple as they once appeared. At least four complications must be acknowledged: the fact that neither Acts nor the letters were written in order to answer the questions posed by modern scholars; the fact that there is inconsistency and diversity within Acts and within the letters; the fact that both Acts and the letters regularly permit a variety of different readings; and the fact that both Acts and the letters are silent about some important historical topics. In light of these difficulties, Phillips proposes that scholars should adopt

two cautious guidelines. First, Acts and the letters should be examined separately and on their own terms. Secondly, the study of Paul's life should be separated from the study of Paul's thought. Yet Phillips also insists that the segmented areas of study must be drawn into a disciplined dialogue. He hopes to accomplish this by beginning with the comparatively sparse portrait of Paul that can be derived from the letters, since the opposite approach too easily sees differences between Acts and the letters wherever the latter are silent. This being the case, each of the core chapters of *Paul, his Letters, and Acts* treats the data of Paul's letters and then the data of Acts before entering into a comparison of the two. Phillips focuses strictly upon Paul's life, setting aside questions about Paul's thought.

The Jerusalem Conference features prominently in Phillips's discussions, for obvious reasons. In Chapter 3 the Conference is a prominent point in Pauline chronology. In Chapters 5 and 6 it is a critical incident for understanding Paul's relationships with other first-century church leaders. But many other facets of Paul's life are also brought into play. Chapter 3 discusses the places to which Paul traveled, the order in which he visited those places and the amount of time that passed between the various visits. 'The true epicentre of the problem', Phillips concludes, 'concerns how the two Jerusalem visits in Galatians relate to the first four Jerusalem visits in Acts' (p. 74). This is hardly a revolutionary observation, but it will be helpful for some readers—particularly those who are just entering into the field of Pauline studies—to find it at the conclusion of an argument rather than at the beginning of one. After considering some of the issues surrounding the Jerusalem visits, Phillips concludes: 'The final question becomes whether one prefers an awkward fit that seems to support the chronological accuracy of Acts or a much more comfortable fit that calls the chronological accuracy of Acts into question' (p. 81).

Chapter 4 addresses five socio-cultural parameters: family, education, religion, vocation and political status. Phillips concludes that, in general, 'the Paul of Acts is more acculturated and socially privileged than the Paul of the letters' (pp. 122-23). This difference, however, can be satisfactorily explained with reference to the rhetorical strategies employed by the author of Acts and by Paul in his letters. Whereas Acts consistently seeks to elevate Paul's status, Paul not infrequently engages in some self-deprecation. Thus Acts was probably written by a Pauline admirer with a tendency to embellish.

Paul's relations with other church leaders are divided between two chapters. Chapter 5 covers Peter, James, John, Barnabas and Titus—since they are known to have been present at the Jerusalem Conference—while Chapter 6 covers Paul's other associates. In both chapters, Phillips suggests that three interrelated tendencies explain the divergences between Paul's letters and Acts. Leadership and authority tend to be more concentrated and less diverse in Acts; Paul's law-free inclusion of Gentiles is less independent in Acts; and relations between Paul and other church authorities are less contentious in Acts. These well-recognized tendencies go a long way towards explaining why the portrait of Paul in Acts differs significantly from scholarly portraits derived primarily from Paul's letters.

Throughout the core chapters of *Paul, his Letters, and Acts*, Phillips 'mildly' (p. 191) endorses the position that Galatians 2 and Acts 15 refer to a single event (i.e. the 'Jerusalem Conference'). His concluding chapter takes up the implications of this interpretive decision and shows why it is so decisive for reconstructing Paul's life. Basically, Phillips argues, interpreters must decide whether Paul was able to overcome controversy and solidify a united relationship with Jerusalem at an early point in his mission, or whether Paul's relations with the Jerusalem authorities became increasingly difficult as his mission progressed. Those who place the events of Galatians 2 during the second Jerusalem visit recorded in Acts will conclude that Paul was both accepted by the Jerusalem church and accepting of the Jerusalem church. Those who equate Galatians 2 and Acts 15 will conclude that the historical Paul 'desperately needed rehabilitation in the post-Pauline churches of the late first century' (p. 194). As for Phillips, he concludes: 'I must concur with the conclusion that the Paul of Acts is indeed a rehabilitated version of the Paul of the letters, a Paul who was recast in terms more attractive to the church of the late first or early second century' (p. 197).

*Paul, his Letters, and Acts* will prove to be a helpful book in several ways. Perhaps more importantly, it provides newcomers with a concise introduction to a lengthy and highly complex historical discussion, and it does so with greater emphasis on the primary evidence than on the secondary literature. Students who are looking to understand the current state of discussion will find enough clarity in Phillips book that they will be able to enter more easily into academic discussions.

For scholars who are already acquainted with the critical issues surrounding Paul's life, *Paul, his Letters, and Acts* provides an opportunity to reconsider established opinions. Phillips makes such an admirable attempt to encourage open-mindedness towards these issues, that his prose becomes irritating at times. But the presentation of the book successfully conveys the fact that the task of reconstructing Paul's life requires the spinning of an amazingly complex web of inter-related presuppositions and inferences. A decision here always has a handful of implications over there. This being so, it is helpful when a scholar comes along and reconsiders the primary evidence at some length without constantly framing that evidence as support for a specific argument.

The most regrettable feature of *Paul, his Letters, and Acts* is the fact that Phillips occasionally presents a questionable interpretation as though it is either self-evident or assured, but provides no sustained discussion of the relevant texts and no dialogue with alternative readings. This is almost certainly due to a need for brevity, but it is problematic in light of Phillips's explicit desire to avoid 'the assured results of scholarship'. Apparently, he was not able to overcome the temptation to slip in a few of the 'assured results' of his own scholarship. I will cite a number of examples.

While considering Paul's letter to the Galatians, Phillips writes that 'Paul's letters seem to imply a single offering for Jerusalem' and that as a consequence, 'Acts and the letters can be reconciled, but only awkwardly' (p. 77). Yet while it may be true that the letters mention only a single offering, this hardly counts as evidence against Paul's involvement in earlier relief efforts. Phillips's argument here is an example of the 'speculation from silence' he seeks to avoid (p. 49).

While discussing the chronology related to the visit to Jerusalem described in Acts 11–12, Phillips comes to the conclusion that 'Saul ultimately arrived at ("returned to") Jerusalem only after James's death and Peter's release from prison (12.25)' (pp. 65-66). A more cautious reader might conclude that this material in Acts is not strictly chronological. Rather, Paul and Barnabas's movements (11.30; 12.25) are being exploited as an opportunity to include some material concerning Judea (12.1-23). Since that material is placed only very loosely around the time of the alleged visit (12.1), it is unwise to draw chronological conclusions from the narrative.

In a rather strange paragraph on p. 149, Phillips writes: ‘Paul’s letters report that Paul and Barnabas twice visited Jerusalem together (Gal. 2.1-10)’. He goes on to state that ‘According to Paul’s letters, the *occasion* for each of these visits to Jerusalem by Paul and Barnabas was to consult with the Jerusalem apostles’ and that ‘According to Paul’s letters, therefore, the locations and occasions of Barnabas’s interaction with Paul and the other apostles were two consultations with the apostles in Jerusalem while in Paul’s company’. It am at a loss as to how this conclusion has been so confidently arrived at from the text of Gal. 2.1-10, since the text reads quite naturally when only a single visit is imagined, but Phillips provides no discussion that might enlighten his readers on this point.

A more striking lack of caution appears in Phillips’s statements about the depiction of Silas and Timothy in Acts. According to Phillips, Acts suggests that Silas and Timothy were loyal first and foremost to the Jerusalem leaders, that Silas was Timothy’s mentor and that both men abandoned Paul’s mission in Corinth after it began to move in a questionable direction. In this connection we find some references to specific silences in Acts 18 and the observation that ‘in Corinth, Silas disappeared from Acts, never to reappear’ (p. 170). So far so good, but the next paragraph suddenly speaks about ‘the break between Paul and Silas’ and suggests that it ‘‘may have been as decisive as was the earlier break between Paul and Barnabas’ (p. 171). Even if ‘strategic silences allow for that inference’ (p. 182), Phillips’s argument from silence seems out of place given his cautious stance elsewhere in the book.

As regards Timothy, Phillips correctly notes that the account of Timothy’s circumcision in Acts precedes the evangelization of Galatia, making the absence of any mention of Timothy in Paul’s letter to the Galatians rather striking. He also correctly notes Paul’s emphatic insistence in Gal. 2.3 that Titus was never circumcised. But although Phillips goes on to conclude that these two facts make for an ‘awkward fit’ between Acts and the Pauline letters (p. 186), this is not self-evident. Is it not possible that Paul found himself in an *awkward situation* wherein it was strategic both to avoid mentioning Timothy (who was circumcised by Paul) and to specifically mention Titus (who was not)? In this case, the account of Timothy’s circumcision in Acts is not an awkward fit with Paul’s silence in Galatians; rather, it helps to explain that silence.

It is inevitable that such quibbles will arise in the reading of any book; however, they are more noteworthy in *Paul, his Letters, and Acts* because Phillips tries so valiantly to eliminate presuppositions and to avoid jumping to unwarranted conclusions. Lest my quibbles be misinterpreted as entailing a negative evaluation of the book, let me reiterate the fact that they amount to nitpicking. They are the exceptions that prove the rule, so to speak. Phillips has produced a remarkably unbiased overview of a very important topic in biblical studies, and his work is to be commended and recommended on that account.

Christopher D. Land  
McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON