

5-1-1998

The road from Damascus: the impact of Paul's conversion on his life, thought, and ministry

Philip L. Tite

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Tite, Philip L. (1998) "The road from Damascus: the impact of Paul's conversion on his life, thought, and ministry," *Consensus*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol24/iss1/14>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

example of methodology, but to a lay person, running into a discussion of the dating of fragments of a scroll from Qumran of St. Mark's Gospel while in pursuit of fragments of a codex lodged in Magdalen College, purportedly from St. Matthew's Gospel, is somewhat disconcerting. Similarly the repeated emphasis on the digraph iota beta as standing for twelve (ten + two), causes one with "little Latin and less Greek" considerable difficulty, since iota is the ninth letter of the Greek alphabet. (This confusion is resolved by asking at your local library. It turns out that in Archaic Greek there was a letter allied with the Phoenician Vav, or the Hebrew Vaiv, located in the sixth position. When it became obsolete in the language, it was retained for counting and arithmetic. It is called Digamma.) Although the presentation is somewhat chaotic, following the argument is great fun. The conclusion reached is very plausible. Dr. Thiede does not dispute the priority of St. Mark—he just pushes things back to the middle of the first century. Thus it would be probable that many of those who had been eye-witnesses to all or part of Jesus' teaching and ministry would have been able to read and comment on the reliability of at least the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, and quite likely that of Luke in addition. Discussion of the implications for the church would lead us too far afield, and would be out of place in a book review. For an alternative view, it might be well to read "The Search for a No-Frills Jesus" in the *Atlantic Monthly* of December, 1996, 278/6.

John Scott-Thomas
Trenton, ON

The Road from Damascus: The Impact of Paul's Conversion on His Life, Thought, and Ministry

McMaster New Testament Studies 2

Richard N. Longenecker, editor
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997
xv + 253 pp. \$25.00

The purpose of the McMaster New Testament Studies (MNTS) series is to make accessible substantial biblical scholarship to a non-specialist, though educated, audience through annual symposium volumes. In this collection of essays on Paul readers are brought into the very complex world of Pauline studies. The conversion/call of Paul has been one of the most profound and debated conversions in Christian tradition and scholarly discussion. Here the focus is placed upon the impact of Paul's conversion in his later thinking as a Christian leader.

The essays included in this volume are varied in the range of thematic topics addressed. After Richard Longenecker's introduction (xi-xv), the following eleven essays are given: Bruce Corley, "Interpreting Paul's

Conversion—Then and Now” (1–17); Richard N. Longenecker, “A Realized Hope, a New Commitment, and a Developed Proclamation: Paul and Jesus” (18–42); I. Howard Marshall, “A New Understanding of the Present and the Future: Paul and Eschatology” (43–61); Terence L. Donaldson, “Israelite, Convert, Apostle to the Gentiles: The Origin of Paul’s Gentile Mission” (62–84); James D.G. Dunn, “Paul and Justification by Faith” (85–101); Seyoon Kim, “God Reconciled His Enemy to Himself: The Origin of Paul’s Concept of Reconciliation” (102–124); Bruce W. Longenecker, “Contours of Covenant Theology in the Post-Conversion Paul” (125–146); Stephen Westerholm, “Sinai as Viewed from Damascus: Paul’s Reevaluation of the Mosaic Law” (147–165); Gordon D. Fee, “Paul’s Conversion as Key to His Understanding of the Spirit” (166–183); Judith M. Gundry-Volf, “Paul on Women and Gender: A Comparison with Early Jewish Views” (184–212); and G. Walter Hansen, “Paul’s Conversion and His Ethic of Freedom in Galatians” (213–237). Each essay has its own bibliography, and indices are included at the end of the book.

There are several major issues within Pauline studies regarding the conversion accounts which should be addressed in any book on Paul’s conversion/call. Specifically, debate has emerged over the sources involved in the discussion. We have three secondary accounts in Acts (9:1–31; 22:1–21; 26:1–23) and several brief biographical sketches in Paul’s authentic letters (esp. Galatians 1:11–24; cf. Philippians 3:5–11). The disputed Pauline letters play a lesser role, if any, in reconstructing Paul’s life and thought (e.g., the Pastorals are likely written over 40 years after Paul’s death, and at a time when ecclesiastical structures were being validated on reformulated Pauline ethics). Difficulties emerge due to the diversity between these accounts (e.g., Paul’s experience in Acts reflects a more evident break with Judaism than in Galatians where a positive portrayal of Paul’s pre-Christian life is presented; Philippians is a bit more tricky, but even there a positive view of Paul’s Jewish heritage is presented, though with Christ being seen as even greater—this likely reflects more of a “call” wherein Paul was elevated to a mission rather than as a break with Judaism). Even in Acts we have three very different narratives evidently presented by the same author, unless we wish to resort to source-critical hypotheses (not uncommon in Lukan studies).

Out of this first issue that scholars must contend with, arises the second issue as to the nature of Paul’s conversion. Was it an actual conversion, wherein Paul left Judaism and embraced a new religion? This is the traditional view, normally advocating a legalistic understanding of Judaism. Or, did Paul understand himself to have received a special calling from God/Christ and thereby still saw himself within the Jewish religion? This is the more common academic understanding of Paul’s conversion/call and reflects both the multiplicity of Judaism—indeed Judaisms—and the Jewish nature of early Christianity. An added issue is the nature of the diverse accounts (an issue I feel needs to be raised, which is not in this volume). The only true narrative accounts of a conversion/call are the three Acts

accounts. Indeed only in Acts do we find a Damascus road experience. Paul does not explicitly make any such reference in his autobiographical accounts. Also, the autobiographical accounts are rhetorical devices used by Paul, framed to authenticate his authority within local church situations (Galatians is the best example; the most substantial work on this rhetorical usage was done by George Lyons in the mid-1980s). In other words, the dynamics involved in understanding Paul's conversion, and his self-understanding and reformulating of his religious notions, are very complicated and require serious methodological care. Some of these issues are indeed touched on in Longenecker's introduction, and one has the sense that such sensitivity will typify the entire volume. Unfortunately, many of the issues involved are not dealt with adequately in this collection. We find constant usage of Pseudo-Pauline letters to refer to Paul's own thought, without qualification of the disputed nature of the texts (a notable exception which proves the rule is Gundry-Volf's essay where such care is indeed taken; contrast this with Fee's unqualified usage of the Pastorals). In many cases the Pauline material is forced into the Acts account with neither qualification nor plausible substantiation (Kim attempts to offer such qualification, by arguing that 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 contains allusions to the Damascus experience, but I find his case methodologically suspect due to reading Acts into the ambiguous statements in Corinthians). The essays refer back to an event (the "Damascus Road" event) when in the undisputed texts there is no such event or location noted. Indeed, to use the Damascus road experience as the referent point for unifying these essays complicates the source-base question by suggesting (especially to non-specialists) a harmonization of the divergent accounts.

The focus of these various essays is to look at how Paul's conversion/call affected his later thought and ministry. Paul's adoption of Christianity is, of course, a major event in his life and surely would have influenced his later thinking. The difficulty, however, is that these essays all seem to identify Paul's conversion/call as *the* originating point for understanding *all* of his views. Again, methodological caution is thrown to the wind as a free-for-all occurs in explaining Paul's thought. Surely, there would have been other possible influences in Paul's life that would have influenced his views. The broader (multi)cultural context that Paul lived within is not given its place, and Hansen even goes so far as to reject outright Hellenistic influences on Paul (in an attempt to refute H.D. Betz) with no more substantiation than a general distaste for Betz' suggestion of such influence ("such an interpretation... leads to a rather disappointing conclusion..." p. 234). Even the Jewish aspects of Paul's life are generally not given their due, despite the fact that Paul was a Jew and continued to see himself as a Jew. Rather than a continuity between Paul and Judaism being drawn (the insightful work Alan Segal comes readily to mind), a demarcation between his former Judaism and his new Christianity seems to emerge throughout most of the essays. Some noteworthy exceptions are Gundry-Volf and, at least initially, Westerholm. The conservative Christian tone of these essays explains many of these tendencies (see especially the last sentence in the book on p. 236).

Despite my criticisms of this collection of essays, there are some noteworthy strengths. Some real gems emerge from these essays, such as Corley's history of interpretation, Donaldson's excellent study of the Pauline mission to the Gentiles, and Gundry-Volf's wonderful gender discussion. The thematic issues dealt with are important and are presented in very readable form. I could see this collection of essays being useful for its intended audience to explore Paul's theological views, such as in a study group or a classroom setting. Many of the essays emerge out of the authors' own published works and these are conveniently referenced in the bibliographies. In summary, this collection of essays would have been better entitled *Thematic Studies of Pauline Thought* than *The Road from Damascus*. As a diverse thematic collection, we have been well supplied with fascinating and useful reading.

Philip L. Tite
 Wilfrid Laurier University
 Waterloo, Ontario

He Could Not Do Otherwise: Bishop Lajos Ordass, 1901–1978

Laszlo G. Terray
 Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.,
 1997

This book makes timely reading when we are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Lutheran World Federation. It provides a few glimpses into the work of that organization and its impact on events in Hungary during the Communist era. Older Lutherans may recall the impact of Bishop Ordass' sermon at the opening service of the LWF Assembly in Minneapolis in 1957, a short time after his release from prison. He was also elected twice as a vice-president of the LWF, although the political situation in Hungary never allowed him to serve in that office.

The book will also interest history buffs who want to learn something about life in the Lutheran Church in a Communist country. Lajos Ordass was a Hungarian Lutheran bishop who faithfully stood up to Adolf Hitler's Nazism and Joseph Stalin's Communism.

While the book chronicles Ordass' entire life, a significant portion concentrates on his struggles with the Communist regime in Hungary and is sketchy about life during World War II. I found Eric Gritsch's translation a bit stilted, but the material held my interest most of the time.

Kenn Ward
 Winnipeg, Manitoba