

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor. *Paul: His Story*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. xvi + 259 pp. \$21.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-926653-1.



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Is *His Story* Paul's Story?

In his previous volume, *Paul: A Critical Life*, J. Murphy-O'Connor elaborated his reconstruction of the chronology of Paul's life, his relations with the communities he founded, the problems encountered in unfolding his mission, and the character and purpose of his letters. The data and conclusions set forth in that volume are presupposed in this one, in which Murphy-O'Connor takes these facts, likened to lifeless bones, and recasts them into a chronologically ordered narrative with Paul as the hero of the story. This weaving together of historical, archeological, geographical and textual details and the author's own considered intuitions, results in an up-close encounter with Paul who is brought to life on every page.

With the help of vivid and detailed depictions of the terrains Paul traversed, the cities he visited, and the people he encountered, Murphy-O'Connor succeeds in bringing the reader on a virtual journey with the hero, who emerges as anything but an endearing character. Although Murphy-O'Connor accents much that is positive about Paul, e.g. his formidable intellect and recognition

of women as full equals, by the end of this road-trip, Paul's dark side prevails. The hero is petulant, self-absorbed, over-bearing, callous and incapable of appreciating any perspective but his own. Murphy-O'Connor's Paul, above neither manipulation nor deviousness, elicits little sympathy, notwithstanding his yeoman efforts in the service of the gospel. One wonders how Timothy, Prisca and Aquila—important co-workers whom Paul seems to have moved around as pawns, at least as the author suggests—ever put up with him! This unflattering characterization of Paul is, at times, exaggerated. So too is the author's assessment of the impact of the Antioch incident on Paul, cited as the most decisive moment in his life after his conversion. Murphy-O'Connor claims that the incident resulted in a total rupture between Paul and the Antiochene community, after which Paul, isolated and lacking Antioch's authoritative backing, unfolds a ministry mired in polemic. Conflict is not just a component part of Paul's story. As Murphy-O'Connor presents it, it is Paul's story! Paul is in conflict with subverters of his law-free gospel, detractors discrediting his apostolic legitimacy, or defectors enticed by more rhetorically

eloquent preachers. Was the Antioch incident the watershed in Paul's life that the author alleges? Unfortunately, there are few clues in Paul's letters to suggest that this incident was viewed by Paul as decisive for his ministry and thought about the law. Murphy-O'Connor treats this as an all-decisive event, but the evidence does not support the claim, even if Paul did see Antioch as significant.

There are a number of places where Murphy-O'Connor's insights, especially concerning the development of Paul's thought, are entirely gratuitous and could mislead the reader to assume that Paul "made it up as he went." Granted, circumstances must have had some effect on Paul and his thought. However, as portrayed, Paul appears to have had no prior theological convictions when he began his evangelizing mission and those he acquired are presented as the result of conflict (cf. p. 114) or contact with pagan shrines; or they are generated by exigencies (p. 113) or existential struggles. For example, Murphy-O'Connor argues that the roots of Paul's notion of sin can be traced to his reflection on the struggle between the pull toward egocentrism and the desire to remain other-centered, a struggle borne from his travels and the wariness he began to experience toward strangers (pp. 52-53). As much as this may be possible, it is hard to believe that Paul, the Jew and Pharisee, had no views on sin and its origin prior to his missionary travels or that he had never before experienced the "dark-side" of human nature. Moreover, in relation to the derivation of Paul's notion of sin--treated separately under the header "The Origin of Paul's Notion of Sin" (pp. 52-53)--Murphy-O'Connor presents his highly conjectural views as if they were certain. There is not a subjunctive in the entire section! On some matters, e.g., whether Paul was married, the author makes it clear that his suggestions are pure speculation. But such qualifications are rare and this lack of clear distinction between auctorial conjectures and reconstructions with a solid evidentiary

base is a potential problem for non-professional readers.

Where attached to epistolary evidence, I found many of Murphy-O'Connor's insights about Paul and his life basically sound, despite the exaggeration and the overdrawn context of conflict which transforms Paul's story into a journey through a mine-field. Moreover, the book is engagingly written and an admirable attempt to go beyond a mere repetition of agreed-upon facts. Some readers will be irked by and dismiss this portrait of Paul, the inflexible curmudgeon. However, the portrait is, in many respects, a welcome antidote to overly sanitized and idealized versions of Paul, which ignore the hard-ball strategy and sophisticated rhetoric he employed as he confronted, and even contributed to, the nasty politics that accompanied the spread of earliest Christianity. The book is an invitation to think out-of-the-box about Paul and will no doubt provoke heated debate. But, as with all of Murphy-O'Connor's work, *Paul: His Story* is well worth the read, whether or not the reader is convinced that it is "Paul's story."

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