

[MJTM 16 (2014–2015)]

BOOK REVIEW

Bruce W. Longenecker and Todd D. Still. *Thinking through Paul: A Survey of His Life, Letters, and Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. 408 pp. Hbk. ISBN 0310330866. US\$44.99.

This book provides an introduction to Paul written by two teaching professors at Baylor University. Motivated by their “healthy respect for Paul” (11), it is intended to provide first-year seminary students with a comprehensive yet accessible textbook on Paul’s life, letters, and theology. Specifically, they intend “to offer an evenhanded, fair-minded, warmhearted treatment” (11) of Paul. Furthermore, they want to challenge students not only to think about Paul but also to think like Paul.

Part I briefly analyzes Paul’s life (chapter 1). This short chapter presents Paul’s life in four stages: the Damascus event, his encounter with Christ, his missions and ministry, and his departure. By utilizing primary and secondary sources, they give an overview of his social, cultural, ethical, political, and religious contexts.

Part II provides a survey of Paul’s letters (chapters 2–10). It is the longest part of *Thinking through Paul* (237/378 pages). The authors introduce the typical thirteen Pauline letters in a fairly chronological order: the earliest letters, the capital letters, the prison letters, and the pastoral letters. For each letter, the authors deal with the socio-historical context and the major controversial issues involved (“situating the vision”), main theme and insights (“centering the vision”), and outline and exegesis (“tracking the vision”).

Longenecker and Still begin with Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians (chapter 2). They discuss the city’s location (with a helpful map), the origin of its name, *Thessalonica*, and the major theme of the letter, *parousia*. Then, the “tracking the

vision” part provides brief exegetical comments on each paragraph unit for both letters. The authors also provide detail about the eschatological concerns of the Thessalonian community. However, they show little interest in other contemporary debates, such as sequence (which one came first), recipients (to Jewish or non-Jewish believers), literary integrity (the presence of redaction or interpolation), and chronology (when and where it was written). However, they pay particular attention to the issue of authorship.

In chapter 3, which covers Galatians, the authors contend that the framework of Galatians—and of the Pauline corpus—is Paul’s apocalyptic narrative: “If Paul’s solution to the Galatians’ dilemma is about self-giving love, that solution is also placed within a righteous apocalyptic framework. Paul imagines a battle raging between two ‘systems’ (we might say) in competition to regulate the cosmos” (96). Galatians is used as a starting point to introduce some of the central themes in Pauline theology that appear frequently throughout the book: the New Perspective on Paul, law vs. grace, work vs. faith, sinful nature vs. Christian righteousness, and faith in Christ vs. the faithfulness of Christ.

The Corinthian letters come in the next two chapters (chapters 4–5). Unlike their treatment of 1 and 2 Thessalonians (chapter 2) and the Pastorals (chapter 10), they designate one chapter each for 1 and 2 Corinthians with more extensive comments in the “tracking the vision” section. They also discuss the issues concerning eschatology, the Lord’s Supper, and spiritual gifts, which are further explored in part III.

For chapters 6 and 7 (Romans and Philippians, respectively), Longenecker and Still tackle two significant themes of the New Testament, namely the righteousness of God in Romans, and the *Carmen Christi* in Philippians. Using Rom 1:16–17 as an example, they explain how the Lutheran understanding of the righteousness of God was culturally constrained by Luther’s circumstances, and thus unable to express the full meaning of the passage. They insist on a fresh look at the matter following Ernst Käsemann, who states “‘the righteousness of God’ signifies God’s powerful saving *activity* in order to rectify the whole of creation” (175). Chapters 8 and 9 follow a similar format, and

chapter 10 deals with the Pastoral Letters. For the last chapter of part II, the authors have two objectives: the first is “to examine the issues that have primary impact on the study of the Pastoral Letters (Titus, 1-2 Timothy),” and the second is “To highlight the central concerns and basic contents of these letters” (261). However, for the former, they seem to place a disproportionate amount of focus on the issue of authorship (264–65), and for the latter, they mainly engage in peripheral issues rather than in major issues, such as the letter’s political context.

Part III addresses Paul’s theology (chapters 11-13). The authors realize that the task of treating Paul’s theology comprehensively is insurmountable. Through the lens of “apocalyptic narrative,” they seek to grasp the major components of Paul’s theological system. Chapter 11, “The Apostolic Narrative of Paul’s Theological Discourse,” opens up with a question: “Are Paul’s letters emblematic of systematic logic?” (299). They acknowledge that it is difficult to discuss Paul’s theology fully. They sympathize with contemporary Pauline scholars who struggle to find an affirmative answer. Nevertheless, responding to Räisänen, who sees many “contradictions and tensions” (299) in Paul, the authors suggest that readers must consider both the contingency (situational aspect) and the coherence (large picture) of Paul’s theology. For example, they utilize J. C. Beker’s “apocalyptic matrix” to discuss Paul’s worldview (301–302).

Chapter 12 explores Paul’s situational context. By dealing with his two major “macro-narratives,” the authors explain how Paul perceived Jews and Gentiles. Their discussion concerning the Jew’s relation to the law deals with the two perspectives, the traditional (i.e., Lutheran) and the New Perspective begun by E. P. Sanders. Moreover, regarding the Gentiles, they focus on Roman civilization using extra-biblical sources to supplement the discussion.

In chapter 13, the authors discuss Paul’s ethical demands for “Jesus-followers” (349). Methodologically, they use five categories: “freedom in Christ and responsibility to others, Christian interpretation of Scripture, the dangers of moral pagantry, the urgency of caring for the poor, and the devaluing of violence” (351–74). Then, in their one-page “A Very Short

Conclusion” (378), they end with words of encouragement for students, saying that this textbook is not the end of “thinking through Paul,” but the beginning.

In sum, in *Thinking through Paul*, Longenecker and Still analyze Paul’s life (part I), survey his letters (part II), and discuss his theology (part III). Despite being quite ambitious in scope, their work is successful in encapsulating the basic knowledge and some of the major scholarly discussions. The authors are also successful in encouraging students to participate in “thinking through Paul” in three ways: introducing provocative and controversial issues on the events of Paul’s conversion and conflicts, contextualizing Paul’s complex world for students through socio-historical research, and asking open-ended questions on forensic issues at the end of each chapter. All these factors make the book commendable for use as a textbook.

However, there are three facets of the work that elicit concern. First, the authors seem to read the “apocalyptic narrative” as the main framework of Paul’s theology, but they fail to define what they mean in their use of the term. After the term first appears in the Galatians section, they use it repeatedly throughout the book, but without a clear definition. Although they seem to devote some space to the topic, they only share what scholars such as N. T. Wright and Bruce Longenecker say about it. It is speculative whether the authors are using the term according to Weiss’s and Schweitzer’s apocalyptic (i.e., eschatological) reading of Paul. Considering that the major topic of part III is the “apocalyptic narrative,” and that it is used throughout the book, the authors are highly presumptuous about how their audience will comprehend this term.

Second, there are two major structural and stylistic issues in this work. Structurally, as stated in the introduction, Longenecker is responsible for chapters 3–6 and 11–13 and Still for chapters 1–2 and 7–10. They also state that they have read each other’s parts and revised accordingly. However, the chapters seem to be uneven in length. In effect, some chapters contain only brief and basic comments with little substance. For example, in chapters 1 and 2, the information regarding Paul’s parents, his education, and reason for persecution is argued without

solid bases. Overall, the authors aim to give a comprehensive treatment of Paul. However, some information is irrelevant, and other important topics are missing. For example, the chapter on Romans lists textual variants without further explanation, the information on Marcion and Cenchreae adds no value to the discussion, the reasoning for Paul's writing to the Romans is tedious, and their take on "the righteousness of God" theme is presented solely with extra-biblical sources while the biblical data is handled insufficiently. Thus, in some chapters, the authors seem to be misled, and their work shows structural and stylistic flaws.

The third and the most significant problem with *Thinking through Paul* is that it lacks exegetical precision. The subtitle, *A Survey of His Life, Letters, and Theology*, reveals little about how they approach the text, but readers would certainly expect that the authors would engage with biblical texts more rigorously. Their work shows that biblical exegesis is not their primary method of dealing with the text. This is even evident in part II, where they cover Paul's letters. In fact, except for the "key verses" box at the beginning of each chapter in part II, biblical passages rarely appear in full and are seldom interpreted. For this reason, readers will find no answers for questions, such as what is meant by "the gospel" Paul preached in 1 Corinthians 15, the "thorn in the flesh" in 2 Cor 12:7, the "wretched man" in Rom 9:24, and the "pattern" and "imitation" in Philippians. This book might help readers understand contemporary issues and debates regarding Paul's life, letters, and theology. However, readers are also likely to finish reading this book with lack of sufficient knowledge about the Pauline corpus itself. Despite these critiques, however, Longenecker and Still provide some significant insights in this work, especially in their survey and analysis of the historical development of Pauline study.

J. C. Jung
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario