


Paul, a stranger in Africa?

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Scholars in the past have signalled the almost complete absence of Paul – as a cypher for the Pauline letters and tradition(s) – in Africa. The apparent lack of use or deliberate ignoring of Paul in Black, African and Liberation Theologies on the continent in all its pluralist variety and richness is generally taken as testimony to the perceived strangeness of the apostle in Africa. However, even if Paul's strangeness does not equate with his absence, at least not altogether, Paul's profiles in Africa include dimensions such as Paul as a stranger, as an unwelcome guest, as a conquering traveller and as a victim of tradition. I argue that Paul's absence from as well as strangeness in Africa may be more apparent than real, and that hermeneutical patterns and practices more than epistolary content may have played a stronger role in the construal of Paul in Africa.

Contribution: Evaluating a range of entrenched interpretive profiles of Paul in Africa exposed certain hermeneutical tendencies that offer the potential for reinterpretation and reassessment of the use of Pauline materials on the continent and elsewhere.

Keywords: New Testament; interpretative tradition; hermeneutics; Paul in Africa; reception.

Introduction

In 1 Corinthians 9:22, Paul wrote τοῖς πᾶσιν γέγονα πάντα [to everyone I have become everything] for the sake of his ministry, summarising his well-known words in 1 Corinthians 9:19–21. However, as much as Paul is held as the apostle for all, all things to all cultures, Paul seems to be conspicuously un-African. Touted as the apostle for all people as references to Jews, Greeks and Romans in relation to his ministry are often read (see e.g. Bird 2016; ed. Porter 2009), this sentiment does not appear to hold true for Africans. The veracity of claims, such as 'Pauline letters continue to be fervently read in Africa during individual devotions, Bible study group meetings and Church services' (Loba-Mkole 2011:3–4), is difficult to ascertain as explicit appeals to Paul – as a cypher for the Pauline letters and tradition(s) – in Africa among African scholars and church leaders do not appear to match interest in other biblical texts.

In fact, beyond popular perceptions, the almost complete absence of Paul in Black, African and Liberation Theologies on the continent is testimony to his perceived strangeness in Africa. A fellow African scholar admitted the Catholic Church's declaration of a Year of Paul as a reason for his publication on Paul in contrast to an argument on Africa's importance to Paul and Paul's continuing relevance on the African continent (Loba-Mkole 2011).¹ In fact, from African perspectives, Paul is often seen as the archetypical supporter (for some, promoter) of the historical bondage of people in slavery, making him part of the problem, not of the solution. Long after the abolishment of slavery, 'black religious thinkers found it difficult to deal with Paul because of the opprobrious odium that had been placed on him by past generations of blacks' (Jones 1984:17; see Punt 2002). Neither the prevalence of Paul as a name for individuals and theological institutions in Africa nor references to passages like Gal 3:28 have done much to sway the sentiment about Paul as an unwelcome stranger on the African continent. Such ambiguities prevail also in scholarly positions on Paul in Africa.

The purpose of this contribution is to consider Paul's tenure in Africa, not a survey of scholarly positions in Africa although they inform the following profiles. Is the apostle's perceived strangeness in Africa more apparent than real, what could be the reasons and what would further engagement with Paul in Africa entail are questions requiring answers. Rather than tabulating work done on Paul related to Africa, reflecting on different Pauline profile construals regarding

¹The relationship between Saint Paul and the continent of Africa has never been a significant point of discussion in the New Testament studies. ... The present article was triggered by the invitation of the Catholic Church to celebrate the 3rd millennium of Paul's birthday during the period of June 2008 – June 2009, which was declared as the Year of Paul all over the world' (Loba-Mkole 2011).

Note: Special Collection: Reception of Biblical Discourse, sub-edited by Itumeleng Mothoagae (University of South Africa).

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Africa allows for a broader interpretive spectrum. Three caveats apply. Firstly, it is obvious that this plotting exercise cannot be exhaustive – more profiles inform Pauline’s reception in Africa than discussed here. Secondly, the ever-present danger of theologically driven approaches and doctrinal frameworks searching textual confirmation looms large in Pauline studies (too). Thirdly, space does not allow for discussion of the probable correlation between the prominence given to Paul and theological positions informed by either Protestant, Reformed or even Evangelical traditions or Catholic and Pentecostal traditions.² The article concludes with a consideration of possibilities for rereading Paul in Africa.

Paul’s tenuous tenure

From early on, Paul and his message evoked questions, sometimes politely phrased as being difficult to understand (δυσνόητά τινα 2 Pt 3:15–16) prompting the remark that ‘There has probably seldom been any one at the same time hated with such fiery hatred and loved with such strong passion as Paul’ (Deissmann 1957:68). Paul’s tenure in Africa appears more tenuous than elsewhere. Recently, in April 2022, a former deputy editor of a major newspaper described Paul’s legacy as a heavy, centuries-old cross for humankind (Forrest 2022):

Paul was a homophobe and political diehard who argued that all governments are owed implicit obedience; women created from and for men, should submit to their husbands and keep silent at meetings; and slaves should obey their masters in ‘fear and trembling’, as a religious duty. (p. 14)

The academy offers no less contentious if less one-sided positions,³ with a width of spectrum matched by claims to exclusive validity (Maier 2006):

The Lukan Paul the Missionary of Acts, the cosmic Paul of Colossians and Ephesians, Paul the institution-defender of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, Marcion’s supercessionist Paul, Paul the gnostic pneumatic of Valentinus, Augustine’s introspective Paul, Luther’s Paul of the liberated conscience, the mystical Paul of Albert Schweizer, Paul the apocalyptic, rabbi Paul, Paul the (radical) Jew, Paul the Evangelical climax of the covenant. (p. 110)

These are a smattering of such positions. Scholars who see a role for Paul in Africa are limited but tend to see links between Paul and Africa⁴ with the latter understood to have

2. Such a distinction is of course not absolute. Africa, not unlike other continents, has a rich diversity of faith formations and expressions of Christianity, with different hermeneutical approaches for the growing Pentecostal or Charismatic positions (see e.g. Abosede & Paul 2020). Some African scholars representing a Catholic context have shown much uptake of the Pauline materials (e.g. Loba-Mkole 2011), while in Protestant traditions, ecclesial practice’s changing nature from cognitively-mental to more experiential-emotive approaches may also impact the reception of the Pauline traditions.

3. Objections levelled against Paul accuse him of power-obsession, pridefulness, being patriarchal and/or a prude and a perverter of Judaism and Jesus’ teachings (e.g. Still 2003:111–112).

4. Scholars have pointed to Paul’s interactions with Apollon as Judeo-African from Alexandria (Ac 18:24–27); a, at best, tenuous possible connection between Rufus and his mother (Rm 16:13); the family of Simon of Cyrene, Jesus’ cross-carrier (Mk 15:21); Paul’s arrival in Rome, facilitated by ships from Alexandria (Ac 27:5–6; 28:11–14); people from Egypt and Cyrene mentioned in Acts (e.g. Ac 2:10; 11:20–26) and a canonical list with 13 Pauline letters confirmed in Tunisia by the Third Council of Carthage in 397 AD (Loba-Mkole 2011:6–7).

been very relevant to Paul.⁵ However, such efforts have not altogether removed Paul’s perceived foreignness.

Paul the stranger

In Acts 21:38, Paul was mistaken for an Egyptian, whether on self-presentation or complexion or dress is unclear, as Acts is more interested in having Paul denying the claim, asserting his Jewishness and Silician origins. Today nobody seriously suggests African roots for Paul; on the contrary, Paul is a stranger in Africa. In a recent study with 25 chapters on the broad topic of religion (Christianity in focus) and development in Africa, two references only were made to Paul. One is in passing when the exasperation of a Kenyan scholar, Thomas Kalume, about Paul is referenced (2 Cor 4:8), and the other when resurrection is related to development (Gathogo 2020:282; Togarasei & Berman 2020:448–452). In an older publication with a similar group of scholars on the use of the Bible in people’s daily lives in Africa, more references to the Pauline material are to be found, stressing Paul’s foreignness to the African context (Gunda 2011).

A conglomerate of factors such as the rhetoric of his letters (e.g. the harshness of Galatians or contemporary contested notions found in Rm 1 or 13), philosophically styled arguments (Rm 7 or 1 Cor 15) and what seems to be a cognitive-focussed approach (e.g. Rm 12) may all play a role that also African readers experience Paul as distanced or ‘difficult’, positing Paul as a bastion of intellectually based faith. The nature and status of Pauline concerns (as expressed in contrasts and opposites like faith law) may today be experienced as world-alienated or reflective of a different discernment. Then again, Paul’s letters not only are occasional, but they exhibit a particular style; as Stirewalt (2003) has argued, the nature of Paul’s letters shows a particularly formal, ambassadorial style and tends to emphasise assumed authority.

Perhaps Paul’s strangeness is related to his writings, epistolary in nature and intended for specific communities dealing with their concerns (and his concern about theirs). ‘Paul’s reputation as a heroic envoy and community founder had wider circulation than his writings, which after all were directed to the occasional affairs of individual communities’ (Vearncombe, Scott & Taussig 2022:338 epub). More complex than simply a matter of literary genre or particularity, Paul’s strangeness may morph into undesirability.

Paul the unwelcome guest

The dominance of Paul in the New Testament (NT) through the letters ascribed to him and his pride of place in the book of Acts,⁶ together with a central role accorded to his notions

5. Loba-Mkole (2011:7–10) answers the question about Paul’s relevance to Africa with reference to three aspects he rightly sees as connected, poverty, conflict and natural resources. Unfortunately, these concepts are not explored intersectionally but segmentally; the cumulative effect of their intersectional impact exceeds individual debilitating power and destructive consequences. Loba-Mkole (2011:7–11) discusses Paul’s proposed reduction of poverty through his appeal for combining work (contemplative action) and (active) prayer (e.g. 1 Th 2:9; 3:10), lowering conflicts through his insistence on reconciliation (e.g. 2 Cor 5:20).

6. Acts purports to tell Paul’s story but, notoriously, never once mentions him writing letters’ (Vearncombe et al. 2022:338 epub).

about faith, grace and free will suggest that the 13th apostle was an authoritative figure among Jesus' early followers. The reality may be quite the opposite, exposing Paul as an initial persecutor of Jesus' followers, less than a team player and a lonely figure at the time of his death. Paul the hero emerged later (Vearncombe et al. 2022):

Nearly a hundred years after his death, in the mid-second century, he began to be name-checked by an aggressive group of partisans who had rediscovered his legacy. But others reacted either with hostility or with relative indifference to this obscure character from the past. (p. 337 epub)

Sentiments in his letters make it abundantly clear why Paul is often the unwanted guest, also in Africa, given his condonation of slavery, preference for celibacy, unsettled stance on gender and the position of women, and hierarchies and normativities of various kinds – and perhaps, most of all, resulting ambiguities. Nowhere is the distinction or contrast between brotherhood and slavery so explicit, even prominent as in Paul's letter to Philemon. Paul's appeal to Philemon (Phlm 16) is to receive Onesimus back οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν. The strong contrast between brother and slave is however also present in Galatians, where the metaphorical distinction between kinship and slavery is made into the dividing line. Notwithstanding the sentiment of oneness in Christ in Galatians 3:28, also between slaves and free persons, the sentiment of the letter as a whole depends on the difference between enslaved and kin-people (see Punt 2010).

When it comes to gender, one scholar has insisted that '[w]hile it is clear enough that Paul was no chauvinist, much less a misogynist, neither was he a card-carrying, flag-waving feminist' (Still 2003:114). However, such a position may lean too much towards an attempt to sanitise Pauline positions and protect a Paul-as-hero image. A protectionist stance does not resolve the masculine, heteronormative, (en)slaver or whitewashed Paul. Mere speculation on Pauline motives is also not helpful, such as 'Sexual repression may account for his hyper-religiosity and fiendish work ethic' (Forrest 2022:14). Paul's unpalatable positions on slavery and gender already do not see him welcomed, and touting a role as an eschatological juggernaut with a worldly alien status further serves to reinforce his position as foreign and unwelcome. Perceptions about Paul as a stranger and unwelcome reach even further.

Paul the disrupter

For some, Paul's disruptions extend all the way, portraying him as a mythmaker (Maccoby 1986) at best and a corrupter of faith at worst.⁷ The contestation of Paul emerges in the NT already in the passage in Peter's second letter mentioned above (2 Pt 3:16). According to Paul's own testimony, too, neither his gospel nor he as a person was always received with open arms indicating how Paul's disruptive interventions were experienced (e.g. 2 Cor 10–13).⁸

7. I hold St. Paul to have been the first great corrupter of Christianity' (JS Mill). Already in the second century CE, a popular spiritual novel presented Paul as 'a dangerous corruptor trying to lead the faithful astray' (Vearncombe et al. 2022:347 epub).

8. So too Roetzel contends that Paul's elaborate salutation in Romans 1:1–6 and his aim in general in the letter was to refute the notion that he was a divisive figure, 'a dangerous innovator and an apostle of discord unworthy of their trust' (Roetzel 1982:63).

Paul's disruptive influence is sometimes postulated on a general level. He is then identified as a sort of change agent in the communities where he worked (Loba-Mkole 2011):

From a socio-historical perspective, Paul can be considered as an apostle and as an agent of change for the Jesus-group movement of the second generation, chosen by God to reach the Gospel of Christ to both the Jews in Diaspora and the Gentiles. (p. 6)

However, the work of change agents is not always appreciated, especially when playing an unsettling role. Paul's disruptive influence can be detected in his discourse, where the spinoff of his attempts to promote a single community, ironically, was the formation of a politics or discourse of Othering.⁹

Paul has been accorded a disruptive role of influence in more specific ways. Some see a positive disruptive influence in Paul towards the governing authorities of the day, identifying anti-imperial sentiments in his letters. Without overtly advocating overt insurrection and walking the tightrope with other first-century Jews between accommodation and resistance, 'Paul does write as a socioreligious dissident on the margins, facing the threat of mob violence and death penalty by the state' (Bird 2019:411 epub). Short of explicit subversive statements, anti-imperialist notions included tacit resistance ingrained in Paul's theological register; the memory of Paul as counter-imperial as found in documents such as Acts (e.g. 17:6–7) or the second-century Acts of Paul (e.g. 11:2) and an impact emanating from the Jewish Scriptures with their oppositional stance between YHWH and other deities, if not political configurations.¹⁰

Paul the status quo protector

The ambiguity surrounding Paul in person and message is extended when the roles he (is said to have) played are considered. Some argue that defiance of the reigning imperial ideology was implicit in Paul's thinking and the theological agenda; others are convinced that Paul saw the Empire as benevolent or of no concern (e.g. Bird 2019:405 epub) or that the disruptive Paul was a protector of the *status quo* (see Tannehill 2004). The tension between disrupting and conforming is evident in his letters, with 1 Corinthians 7:17–24 being instructive. This text often receives negative press, when read through 7:20 to encourage maintaining the socio-cultural status quo, a theology of the *status quo* (Schweitzer 1968:187–194).¹¹ Others protested that the passage focusses on the implications of God's calling and

9. '[Paul] initiates a discourse that in many cases validates sameness, that condemns certain kinds of difference and by means of silence renders others unthinkable, that promotes community cohesion by self-discipline and outright self-denial' (Polaski 1999:136). His advocacy of the inclusivity of the reign of God and its earthly manifestations as seen for example in Romans 1:14 and 13:1–14 (Jewett 2000:62–68) saw inclusiveness dependent on communities' assent to his visions, understandings and praxis.

10. Paul's conviction was that God in the Messiah already had defeated and would yet defeat the "powers," whether the Roman pantheon or the Roman legions, and establish his reign over all things ... opposition to the imperial cult and Roman power was simply an extension of the Jewishness of the early churches' (Bird 2019:407).

11. Paul's theory or theology of the status quo meant '[i]f, therefore, a slave became a believer he [sic] should not, on this theory, if he were afterwards offered freedom, accept it' (Schweitzer 1968:194–195).

servicing Christ within particular contexts (Thiselton 2006:111). Such a reading may be too theologically biased, oblivious to social location determinants, driving an unwarranted disjuncture between theological obedience and social responsibility. However, Romans 13 and 1 Thessalonians 4 also appear to reflect political acquiescence or apolitical aspirations; even Galatians 3:28 often lauded for promoting egalitarian relationships, speaks more to the position of believers with respect to Christ than social positions in the world¹² – seemingly intent on continuing ethnic, gender and social differences regardless to their obliteration at soteriological level (ed. Miller 2003:10–11; see Punt 2010).¹³

In an autobiographical account on almost a quarter of a century of ministry, Pauline materials featured interestingly in African missionary Solomon Nkesiga's ministry. Besides a scant note about Paul's missionary journeys, he identifies what he calls the 'tragedy' of biblical misinterpretation. He cites the example of the (ab)use of Pauline texts by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in SA, which he sees as reaching back to events in Afrikaner history (Great Trek, crossing rivers, battles fought against indigenous peoples and so forth), in the effort to claim divine-election status, aligned to the Israelites of old and the Jewish state formed in 1948 (Nkesiga 2011:159, 168). The only other reference to Paul in his life's work relates to women's ordination in the church. Struggling to reconcile 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 to support women's ordination, Nkesiga finds Paul problematic and resorts to a utilitarian approach and a Pauline proof text: 'To this argument we can evoke Paul's conclusion "Judge for yourselves" (1 Cor 11:13)' (Nkesiga 2011:180). Such questions regarding Paul's unsettling or confirmative impact and resulting ambiguity may be related to Paul's travelling status.

Paul the conquering traveller

Biblical texts are characterised by travels of various kinds. The resulting travel discourse in the NT is related to journeys of characters from ancient contexts and from Jewish antiquity, in particular. Within the Roman imperial context, the NT's travel discourses often unfold as displacement discourse, for which the relations between travels, maps and borders were crucial. Pauline letters refer to completed and impending visits, while Acts plotted Paul's travels by routes and destinies, often in detail, to give credence to Jesus' words (Ac 1:8). These texts are indicative of the sense of a mapped world in whose territories Jesus' followers move around. Questions soon arise, such as to what extent these documents served Pauline travels in the cause of identity (not acculturation) and imperialism? Are they in some sense exporting pre-packaged knowledge to 'the colonies' for

12. 'The point is that for the believer the distinctions Jew/Gentile, free/slave, male/female have no bearing on the inheritance of the promise since he or she is "in Christ" and thus in the position of the true inheritor' (ed. Miller 2003:10).

13. Claiming the Pauline text of Galatians 3:28, oblivious to its ambivalences and challenges (e.g. Punt 2010), over many decades has seen some scholars ending up interpreting the text and Paul in general as models for harmonious, multicultural communities (e.g. Barclay 1996:197–214). Even from a non-confessional point of view, Paul has been connected to universalism, stressing a philosophical concern to identify the subject and the universal through singularity (Badiou 2003) – however, the reliance of Paul's rhetoric on ethnicity has to be addressed elsewhere.

dissemination and adapting, while dismissing the indigenous, home-grown as unimportant or secondary?

Neither is travel to distant lands and triumph over indigenous people uncommon to the NT,¹⁴ nor did the entanglement of Empire with people movement and people regulation leave Paul as a travelling apostle unscathed. Part of Paul's broader program of missionary travels, 1 Thessalonians acted as a substitute for his conquering presence, maintaining his vocal dominance. It refers to Paul's experiences in Philippi (2:2) encounters with assemblies in Judea (2:14) and the Thessalonian community's role in Achaia and Macedonia (1:7–8). In 2:18, Paul expressed his frustration for not having been able to visit the Thessalonians, referring to Timothy as his substitute. The letters' apocalyptic nature clarifies how Paul used conquering travel. On the one hand, apocalyptic with its ultimate, final and radical scenarios presents divine conquering travels (4:14–17), sudden and unexpected (5:2). On the other hand, Paul presented himself as an eminent emissary, the ultimate traveller within an apocalyptic context, collecting and leading others on the final journey (4:16–17). Even as he offers praise and appeals to communal love and support (4:9–12) in their own land, his travels anticipated conquered communities, inviting others to follow suit (see 1:8). While such images could be viewed in a sense as anti-imperial, Paul still tends to speak on the same terms as the empire, repeating or perhaps perpetuating an imperial discourse – and, subsequently, he did not destabilise empire as much as replace it with another (see Punt 2012b).

Paul the victim of (interpretive) tradition

Paul-bashing sentiments, often in popular media, are easy to find. Recently, the *religion* edition of the Mail & Guardian newspaper (referred to above) wrote on Paul as follows (Forrest 2022):

He entrenched such teachings [fallen nature, predestination and justification by faith] through repeated, bullying insistence on doctrinal conformity ... On this foundation rose a monolithic, authoritarian-hierarchical church that stifled inquiry and debate, banned books, burnt heretics and entrenched religious obscurantism over scientific thinking. (p. 14)

In scholarship, the notion that 'Christianity without Paul is quite literally nothing' (Wilson 1997:front flap) saw the accusation that Paul perverted Christianity into some kind of Paulinism as a pejorative comment: 'the apostle was viewed as having taken the pleasant, practical, loving teaching of Jesus, and converted it into an arid, abstract religion' (Silva 1994:12). As it is often put, abandoning the religion of Jesus, Paul founded a (new) religion *about* Jesus, and Paul is transformed into the (second) founder of Christianity.¹⁵

14. See for example Punt (2015:145–147). In biblical studies, the mission narratives of many biblical texts (and the cultures that carried the texts with them on their journeys) can often be read as imperialist, sanctioning authoritative travellers and reducing all nations to obedient student disciples of Jesus or the apostles as their new representatives among the colonisers (Dube 2000:140–141).

15. See for example the criticism of such thinking by Furnish (1985:11–13); for further discussions, see for example Wenham (1995) and Wright 1997.

The ambiguous and ambivalent status accorded to the Pauline writings for the first hundred odd years after his death requires more reflection. The limited initial uptake of Paul by Clemens of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna and then only in a circumspect way signalled Paul not as an authority for tradition but rather as a liability to be managed with a message to be sanitised. The earliest Christian tradition valued Paul for his role in founding gentile communities of Jesus' followers, but apart from Marcion's circles, Paul was not appreciated as a theologian (Vearncombe et al. 2022:350 epub). It is telling if unsurprising that overviews of Pauline interpretation over the centuries often take the work of FC Baur in the first half of the 19th century as starting point (e.g. Smith 2013). In the same publication, tracing 'the major contours of Pauline scholarship over the last century and a half, with an emphasis on the present state of Pauline research' (Smith 2013:1), Pauline scholarship in relation to Africa or scholarship from Africa on Paul is not even mentioned. This is representative of a trend that appears to trace Pauline reception for some 250 years only and then largely in the Global North – a trend that generally accorded Paul hero status.

Paul the (macho or fallen) 'hero'

The portrayal of Paul as a hero of sorts, a 'Paul-centered habit' (c.f. Johnson-DeBaufre & Nasrallah 2011) has been an important contributor to skewed Pauline interpretation, rendering person and message outside the realm of criticism. One scholar suggested that in 4th-century Christianity, Paul and Peter replaced Romulus and Remus as the new hero twin-founders of the now Christian Rome (Crossan s.a.).¹⁶ In biblical studies, the portrayal of Paul as a hero of sorts has played a causal role in a very particular mode of (Pauline) interpretation that came to constitute the general Pauline tradition. Others opted for an understanding of Paul not in exceptionalist terms but rather as 'one among many' in the Corinthian assembly. His writings, which are rhetorical compositions intent on persuasion and dialogic in nature, are then best seen 'as sites of debate, contestation, and resistance rather than as articulations of one individual's vision and heroic community-building efforts' (Johnson-DeBaufre & Nasrallah 2011:162).¹⁷

Was Paul a hero defined by bold, self-assured and nonchalant, even opportunistic behaviour riding roughshod over communities and their interests, a bombastic intruder set on getting his way by (literary deceptional) hook or by (inappropriate behaviour) crook? Or was (is) Paul a fallen hero with more aspirations and ambitions than ability or even presence, a weak figure who sought to hide behind apparent humility, aimed at manipulation? The heroic depiction initiated a vicious circle in which hero status

16. Crossan rushes to point out differences of opinion between Peter and Paul are already present in Paul's own writings (see e.g. Gl 2), and comments in the Petrine tradition (e.g. 2 Pt 3:15–16) about difficulties surrounding the understanding of Paul's letters – tradition shows evidence of attempts to reconcile these in Christian imagination.

17. See the earlier work and arguments beyond the heroic Paul by others (e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza 2000; Wire 1990).

scripted the understanding of Paul's historical person and role and Pauline interpretation. The exemplary, heroic Paul-tradition lives on in the Christian tradition to this day (see Avila Kaminski 2022).

Rereading and reclaiming Paul

Is there an alternative to concluding, 'For St Paul unconditional love and kindness, or agape, was rhetorical flourish, a barren abstraction' (Forrest 2022:14). Retreating to Pauline texts, suspending interpretative history or pretending that hermeneutical effort is *passe* will not suffice – 'there is no Paul without his interpreters, and there is no apostle without history' (Maier 2006:110). For some, the problems caused by Paul outweigh the benefits of continuing engagement with the Pauline corpus and its interpretive history. That said, if we want to pursue Paul's potential for and on the African continent, carefully and in a circumspect way, how do we deal with Paul as a 'slippery character'? (Carey 2019:63 epub).

Pauline provenance (interpretive history)

Pauline reception history has played a strong, determinative role in the interpretation of these letters (e.g. Beker 1991). Biblical scholars' general reluctance to engage with the impact of interpretive history on contemporary understanding impinges on meaning and meaning-making. Suggesting conscious and overt engagement with interpretive history does not replace the importance of engagements with Pauline texts nor suggests searching for some corrective core in them. To consider the impact of interpretive history is to commit to deal with issues such as readers' roles and powers in interpretive processes. Claims such as '[a]lthough portions of Paul's epistles are certainly complex, much of what Paul wrote in his letters is comprehensible to a sympathetic reader who possesses a degree of education and patience' (Still 2003:116) are compromised by a centuries-long history interpretative.

Whenever interpretive history is engaged, caution is advised, and this is certainly the case with the Pauline corpus too. Claiming the Paul of Acts (so Loba-Mkole 2011:4–5) or even the Deutero-Paulines renders a different interpretation of Paul than reliance upon the undisputed letters. Loba-Mkole (2011) presents Paul:

[W]ith his intercultural background as a born Jew and an accomplished Pharisee, a Roman citizen, a Hellenistic rhetor and a former Arabian resident for about 14 years, Paul was well placed to carry out his mission with both ethnic and universalistic tones. He was the most qualified intercultural mediator of the Gospel. (p. 5)

This portrays a composite image reliant more on centuries-old reception history than the letters. Taking a cue from the Pauline legacy in the second century when Paul's message was emptied from its major distinctive ideas, and when Paul was assigned a more placating image of a 'generic moralizing preacher' (Vearncombe et al. 2022:345 epub), the imposition of interpretive history may result in the loss of distinctive

Pauline aspects. What has been the implications of the late acceptance of Paul; on reflection on Pauline writings and their message; or on the communities who were not keen to take up these writings?

Positioning Paul

The dominant approach to Paul has been described variously, but the overarching paradigm of Pauline interpretation today still remains 'academic Christian theological modernism' (Stowers 2011:106). However, the growing realisation that theology and religion are intertwined with politics, economics, culture and so forth has led to more self-awareness in and efforts to actively investigate hermeneutical patterns, beyond 'the Bible speaks for itself' approaches. This has led to more accounting for the role of the Bible and its various constituent parts, with their own peculiarities, in both the larger societal formations and processes (including politics and economics) as well as in the daily lives of people. On the one hand, the disavowal of a conservative, quietist Paul nevertheless bent on perpetuating the status quo while also affirming a subversive Pauline tendency towards the social orders of the day create interesting interpretive possibilities.¹⁸ On the other hand, awareness of Paul's usurpation of power and authority, issuing instructions and (at times, confusing) commands triggers the realisation that Paul's socially challenging concerns ironically rely upon a show of support for him, buying into his understanding, his evaluations and his programme (see Punt 2012a).

As the interpretation of the Bible is an act of power, the hermeneutical positioning of Paul is imbued with power (Polaski 1999):

Until interpreters uncover the complex dynamics of power, until communities of faith acknowledge the hidden structures that quietly oppress, Paul's writings will remain blunt instruments in the hands of those who would reinscribe their denial of difference. (p. 136)

While 'the force of the "Paul-centered habit" among Pauline scholars' remains 'including not only the vast majority who identify with Paul's theology and thus seek to advocate for it, but also among those who openly eschew a theological agenda', a dialogic approach to the Pauline letters is advised (Matthews 2015:10).¹⁹

Pauline positions

Typically, Paul is seen to be unconcerned with politics, economics and social problems emanating from oppressive systems. Scholars take Paul's eschatological and apocalyptic views as relativising agents, diverting attention from the material world and its conditions to spiritual, other-worldly

18. Harker criticises 'post-imperial biblical critics' for reverse engineering, seeing 'empire-studies as a way to re-brand [Paul's] domineering behaviour and to label the consequences of its later interpretations during the modern colonial era as theologically misguided detours from an original, and now rediscovered, message' (Harker 2018:211).

19. Literature on resistant and transformative African (e.g. Cloete 2003; Kamudzandu 2010; Mukuka 2012; Punt 2002) and African American readings (e.g. Bowens 2020; ed. Felder 1991) of Paul is growing.

However, the Pauline letters are not silent on socio-political issues, even if texts such as Romans 13 and 1 Thessalonians 4 are taken to assert political acquiescence or an apolitical stance. Like earliest Christianity, the Pauline letters far from resembling 'an anarchy of Pietism' (Sanneh 1992:10) resembled local revitalisation that came to face opposition from structures of centralised control and power (see Punt 2002).

While moving beyond the heroic portrayal or profiling of Paul (Johnson-DeBaufre & Nasrallah 2011) remains a key challenge, the possible value of Pauline sentiments for burning issues cannot be overlooked, such as the importance of the Jerusalem collection (see 2 Cor 8–9) for reflecting analogically on poverty in Africa today (Punt 2004; but c.f. Boaheng 2020).²⁰ So too, theologically speaking, Paul's argument, for the inclusion of the Gentiles – disregarding for a moment Paul's own interests – sets an important agenda for breaking with ethnocentric notions. Also, for the conceptualising of an indigenous hermeneutic for the reading of Scripture, and again without claiming naïve or innocent positions, Pauline inclusivity provides useful considerations. Recently, scholars have explored Pauline notions in relation to central African concerns. Kamudzandu argues that Paul's construction of Abraham as a spiritual ancestor of 'all' faithful people countered Roman ideology based on Aeneas as Rome's founder. Considering these two canonical ancestors comparatively in a 21st century multi-ethnic 'Christian world', the Romans letter is less about God saving individuals and more about the debate between Paul and the Jewish-Christian interlocutor on how families of people and nations establish a kinship with God and one another. While exploring the ancestors' role may sound oblique to Global North scholarship, it is core to African identity feeding into an appreciation for ethnic diversity (Kamudzandu 2013; see also Dube 2015).

Conclusion: Paul, Africa and hermeneutics

As these Pauline profiles show: '[t]he apostle Paul was a controversial figure from the start' (Smith 2013:1) and a 'slippery character' (Carey 2019:63 epub), still people continue to be drawn to 'this first-century missionary who criss-crossed the eastern Mediterranean proclaiming the cross of Christ' so that one has to ask about his appeal (Still 2003):

Why are so many drawn to Paul like moths to light? What is the abiding attraction to this presumably unattractive person who could not preach his way out of a wet paper bag (2 Cor 10:10)? And is an attraction to Paul as fatal as his foes contend? (p. 115)

Amidst the various profiles that can be construed for Paul, Paul's absence from as well as strangeness in Africa may be more apparent than real – cloaked in ambiguity, it

20. At least some early Christians saw Paul as someone who accepted the divestment of possessions as normative for early Jesus followers. Clement of Alexandria preached about the rich young man/ruler texts of the gospels (Mt 19:16–24//Mk 10:17–31; Lk 18:18–30) by citing 2 Corinthians 8–9 as echoing, explaining and applying Jesus' teachings. Cyprian refers to 1 Timothy 6:7ff to comfort those who might be reduced to poverty by obeying gospel texts like Luke 12:33, and it seems that he used a Pauline doctrine of justification to interpret the story of Zacchaeus.

nevertheless deserves more attention than what it has received until now and acknowledgement that hermeneutical patterns and practices rather than epistolary content may have played the stronger role in the construal of Paul in Africa (Gunda 2011):

[T]he Bible has become the manual for conduct and practice, even though the Bible may have contributed to some of the challenges faced across Africa, the same Bible has also been singled out as a possible tool for addressing the challenges. (p. 17)

And, where Pauline absence has settled in, this may be determined more than anything else by an interpretation compelled through established hermeneutical lenses.

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