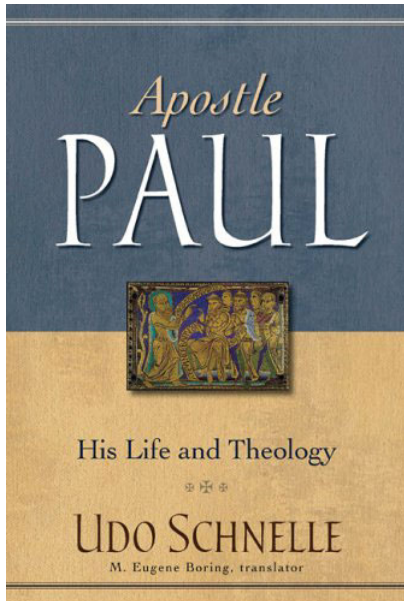


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Schnelle, Udo

Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology

Translated by M. Eugene Boring

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Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology is an English translation of the German original, *Paulus: Leben und Denken* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), written by the distinguished New Testament scholar Udo Schnelle of the University of Halle. Its translator, M. Eugene Boring, was the I. Wylie and Elizabeth M. Briscoe Professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School and is also an eminent New Testament scholar. The translator, moreover, has greatly enriched the book with an expanded bibliography that includes additional English monographs and articles that supplement Schnelle's extensive list of German publications. In addition, at the request of the author and the publisher, Boring has also included occasional notes on the German text that explain difficult theological vocabulary, translation problems, and European debates that are likely unfamiliar to many American readers. Boring's notes greatly enhance the usefulness of this volume and contain a wealth of information. Schnelle in turn has read Boring's translation to check its accuracy, thereby guaranteeing to the reader that the present English work is an accurate rendition of his original German publication. The result of their combined efforts is a magisterial work that will become an essential reference volume for students and scholars alike desiring a convenient book that examines all important primary texts and scholarly positions in Pauline research, particularly in English and German.

Schnelle's book explores virtually every conceivable topic related to Paul's life and theology. Each chapter is designed to be read as an independent unit. There are surprisingly few repetitions in this massive study, so each section does stand on its own as the author intended. The book is divided into two parts that explore Paul's life and theology. The first, "The Course of Paul's Life and the Development of His Thought," explores Paul's life and writings in light of their historical context. In part 2, "The Basic Structures of Pauline Thought," Schnelle explores a wide variety of themes, such as Paul's understanding of God, Christology, the body, and the church. Perhaps the most valuable contribution of Schnelle's study is his extensive use of primary sources from the Hellenistic world. Throughout the entire work Schnelle seeks to summarize all major positions and relevant texts before offering his own interpretation. In many instances, lengthy passages, often from lesser-known Greek authors, are quoted in full. The result is a study that is quite balanced and thorough in its treatment of all major issues pertaining to Paul's thought.

Schnelle begins his study with an insightful prologue that not only examines the problems inherent in studying Paul but also defines his approach. Of particular interest is Schnelle's discussion of historiography. Schnelle emphasizes that within the realm of historical constructions there are no "facts" in the "objective" sense but that interpretations are built on interpretations (29). The problem, as he aptly highlights, is that historians wishing to understand Paul's life, and the influence of his career upon his theology, must explore both how and when his letters have been transmitted. Schnelle comments that a chronological outline makes it necessary to determine not only the number of authentic Pauline letters but their dates of composition as well. He begins by offering the reader a detailed chronology of Paul's life that is based on the authentically Pauline corpus (1 Thessalonians, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans, Philippians, Philemon) and the book of Acts. Throughout the book Schnelle emphasizes the importance of chronology for understanding Paul's theology, a topic that he discusses in some fashion in nearly every chapter. For example, he comments that it is of considerable significance for understanding the place of the doctrine of justification in Paul's thought whether one dates Galatians after 1 Thessalonians but before the Corinthian correspondence, or prior to Romans. The result of such a chronological approach—in contrast to a purely thematic outline of Pauline theology—is a book that takes seriously the fact that each of Paul's letters was embedded in, and affected by, its own situation.

Many readers will undoubtedly find Schnelle's discussions of the discrepancies between Paul's letters and Acts to be the most insightful sections of his book. Schnelle recognizes that both Paul and the author of Acts incorporate fictional elements and that all historical reconstruction is to a great degree uncertain. To assist in distinguishing novelistic elements from historical truth in these writings, Schnelle considers each document's

theological emphasis, giving primacy to Paul's own accounts of events whenever possible. He devotes much attention to what is perhaps the central problem in understanding Paul's theology and life, namely, the exact sequence of events following his conversion. Regarding the testimony of Acts that Paul visited Jerusalem immediately after his conversion (Acts 9:26), in contrast to Paul's statement that he did not (Gal 1:17), Schnelle favors Paul's own account. Schnelle notes that the author of Acts sought to emphasize the continuity of salvation history and church unity and therefore placed Paul's contact with the Jerusalem apostles immediately after his conversion. Although Schnelle recognizes that it is often difficult, perhaps impossible, to separate truth from fiction in Paul's writings and Acts, he generally prefers Paul's testimony, since Acts often presents a later theological interpretation of Paul's thought in light of his life. Schnelle's examination of fictional elements and rhetoric in Acts, in relation to Paul's mission and writings, complements the seminal work of Richard Pevro (*Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987]), which explores Acts' fictional qualities in light of Jewish, Christian, and pagan novels.

Schnelle adopts a chronological, rather than a thematic, approach throughout this volume to stress Paul's changing theology over the course of his life. He emphasizes that Paul's letters should be read as individual documents, constantly stressing that none presents a complete compendium of mature thought in light of the Damascus event. Although Schnelle recognizes that Paul's conversion experience contributed to his theology of justification and faith as developed in Galatians and Romans and that he undoubtedly thought about these topics prior to his conversion experience, we cannot assume that he had always thought about them in the categories found in Galatians and Romans. Schnelle comments, "The *subject matter* of justification and law had always been of concern to Paul since his conversion, but not the *doctrine* of justification and law as found in Galatians and Romans" (100). Concerning Romans, which many tend to read as *the* Pauline theology, Schnelle, in keeping with his attention to chronology, states that it should be understood as Pauline theology in the year 56 C.E. as set forth for the Roman church (42). The result of this approach is a book that portrays Paul as a man whose theology grew, changed, and adapted over time in light of his expanding understanding of the Torah and Gentile mission and in reaction to the incidents that took place during his own mission.

Among the many notable discussions of Paul's life and thought in this book is Schnelle's examination of early Christianity and Paul's persecution of Christians. Regarding the debate over the influence of Hellenism on Judaism, Schnelle seeks a middle course and believes that Paul, and the early Christians as well, participated in debates that were carried on both within Judaism and the Greco-Roman world. For this reason, Schnelle seeks to highlight the contributions of pagan Greco-Roman literature and Jewish texts for

understanding Paul's life and thought. However, whereas the authors of pagan Greco-Roman material were certainly not Jewish or Christian, since these writings reflect a polytheistic culture, Schnelle, as with many New Testament scholars, uncritically accepts a Jewish authorship for many noncanonical texts. For example, Schnelle uses *Joseph and Asenath* to explore possible Jewish antecedents to the later Christian mission to the Gentiles without any mention of the dating controversy of this book, which several scholars view as a product of late antiquity and not Jewish. The pioneering work of James R. Davila (*The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian, or Other?* [JSJSup 105; Leiden: Brill, 2005]), as well as the new edition of George W. E. Nickelsberg's classic text on Second Temple Jewish Literature (*Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah* [2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005]) should force New Testament scholars to exercise caution when using the pseudepigrapha for reconstructing early Jewish thought, since it cannot be excluded that some of these works could have been written by Christians. Nevertheless, Schnelle's use of Jewish and Greco-Roman texts in particular makes this an essential reference book, since many lengthy passages of lesser-known works are quoted in full.

Schnelle's use of the Qumran texts for understanding Paul's thoughts, and his attention to Hellenistic Jewish literature and culture, is quite welcome and often lacking in many works on Pauline theology. His discussion of Jewish literature and Paul's theology is among the more insightful contributions of his volume. Schnelle highlights Paul's background as an observant Pharisee raised in the Greco-Roman world who was comfortable in two cultural spheres. He emphasizes that Paul was a Torah-observant Jew who persecuted the nascent Christian sect because of its proclamation of the crucified Jesus as the Messiah, its critical view of the temple, and the growing independence of its organizational structure and missionary practice. Schnelle's comments on Paul's thought and background could have been strengthened by a more extensive treatment of Pharisaic religion, as well as the problems inherent in reconstructing the beliefs and practices of this religious sect. Although Schnelle cautiously weighs the evidence, and considers the apologetic character of Paul's writings and Acts, he often accepts the testimony of Josephus at face value. Rather than accepting Josephus's statements regarding the Pharisees as factual and then using this information to reconstruct Paul's background, Schnelle fails to recognize that Josephus's writings are also apologetic historiography. Josephus often obscures or distorts historical facts in light of the post-70 C.E. destruction of the temple and his situation in Rome, to buttress his own agenda in the same manner as Paul and Acts. (For an examination of this important issue, see now the collection of essays on the topic edited by Zuleika Rodgers, *Making History: Josephus and Historical Method* [JSJSup 110; Leiden: Brill, 2006].) A reference to Steve Mason's classic study on this issue (*Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees: A Composition-Critical Study* [Leiden: Brill,

1991]) could have helped this section, as well as a reference to more recent literature on the *Psalms of Solomon*, which has challenged its Pharisaic authorship.

Schnelle builds upon his discussion of Paul's Pharisaic background to discuss the apostolic council as recounted in Acts with Galatians. The basic issue dealt with at this council, according to Schnelle, was how to account for Gentiles in the movement, whose presence alongside Jews outside the land of Israel was not sufficiently dealt with in the Torah. Schnelle believes that the apostolic council did not unite Paul's Gentile mission and the mission to the Jews into a single view. Rather, it regarded each as a legitimate expression of the Christian faith: "It was the equal status, not the identity, for each version of the gospel that was confirmed at the apostolic council" (129). Paul's innovation at this council was in separating circumcision and Torah observance from membership in the church for Gentile Christians. For this reason, Schnelle argues that it is erroneous to connect the origin of the Pauline doctrine of justification in the exclusive sense with this council or with the Antioch incident. At this time Paul both defended his view that Gentiles were free from the requirement of circumcision and acknowledged that Jewish Christians were obligated to follow the Torah. However, by the time he wrote Galatians, Paul believed that there was only one gospel that was valid for Jews and Gentiles and that the Torah no longer had constitutive significance for Jew (Jewish Christians) or Gentile (Gentile Christians).

There are too many issues raised in Schnelle's book to discuss in this review. Readers will find a wealth of material in this book, as well as several provocative theses. Schnelle believes that Christianity's early success, and the eventual parting of the ways between Christianity and Judaism, were to a great extent the consequence of Christianity's unique universal plan of messianic redemption that included people of all nations and cultures. He proposes that the success of the Christian mission among Gentile sympathizers of the synagogue in Rome led to a defensive reaction within Judaism, which was acerbated in the aftermath of Claudius's edict. In his discussion of the early Christian movement, Schnelle highlights the important role of house churches, which, like Hellenistic Jewish synagogue congregations, appeared to outsiders as clubs or associations. (For this issue, see further the insightful study of Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003].) He also highlights the growing skepticism among many pagans regarding the multiplicity of gods and the rise of pagan monotheism as a factor that greatly helped the early Christian mission. (For this important observation, see further the essays in Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, eds., *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999].)

Schnelle's book, although quite lengthy, is written and translated quite well: it is a pleasure to read. The author and translator have worked well together to produce a work that surpasses the German original: it should be regarded as an entirely new study! Schnelle's book will undoubtedly become a classic in the field. For the size and scope of this volume, its price is quite reasonable. It is an ideal work for both seasoned scholar and novice alike: both will discover plenty to ponder in this massive work. For those interested in the New Testament and early Christian history, Schnelle's book is essential reading.