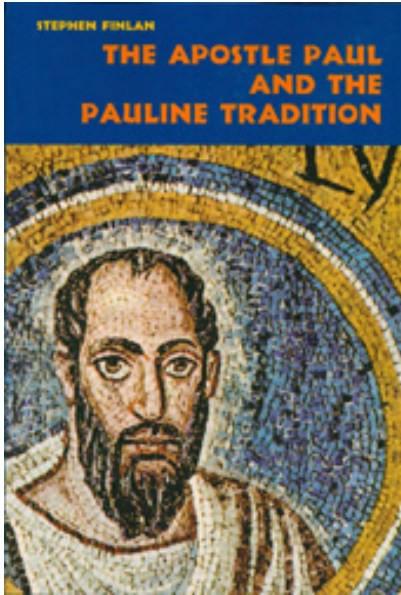


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**Finlan, Stephen**

*The Apostle Paul and the Pauline Tradition*

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2008. Pp. xiv + 229.  
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Korinna Zamfir  
Babeş-Bolyai University  
Cluj, Romania

Stephen Finlan (Drew University) offers in this volume a very useful introduction to the Pauline Epistles and to the tradition that has emerged from them. In the introductory chapter, Finlan remarks how prevalent readings of various texts are determined by other New Testament traditions. The Gospels are read through the lens of Pauline tradition, while the common image of Paul largely draws from Acts. Thus it appears that a major aim of the volume is to propose a differentiated understanding of Paul's thinking and of the Pauline tradition that has grown out of the undisputed epistles, attempting to recover Paul's genuine teaching. Awareness of the difference between Paul's own letters and the traditions that reshape, simplify, summarize, clarify, complete, explain, and often restrict the meaning of authentic Pauline texts is indeed extremely important, and Finlan's point, like his nuanced discussion of the various epistles written by or assigned to Paul, is very helpful. Such treatment of the topic obviously implies that Finlan distinguishes between authentic and pseudonymous epistles (2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, the Pastoral Epistles, and obviously Hebrews are included in the latter group, while Colossians tends to be seen as authentic).

Finlan states from the very beginning that the volume is designed for students. Indeed, the author provides basic explanation on topics such as the theological, social, and literary

setting of the epistles, including Jewish messianism, the meaning of Hellenism, the Hellenistic social, cultural, and philosophical background of the letters, and the life of Paul. Similarly, the thorough treatment of each epistle supplies readers with essential knowledge about issues such as authorship, the conditions in which the epistle was written, dating, and the main topics of the letter. Much of these data are of course found in almost all introductions to the New Testament, yet some points deserve special recognition. Such is Finlan's critical discussion of those texts or topics that often divide scholars. Readers gain awareness of scholarly debates and issues in contemporary literature. A clear-cut answer is not always given, but students are introduced to the various positions and possible interpretations of the Pauline texts. Many of the current issues in Pauline scholarship, such as the social setting of early Christianity, the topic of patronage and beneficence, and the connections with Stoic and Cynic literature, are briefly addressed.

As expected, the Corinthian correspondence, Galatians, and Romans receive the most extensive treatment. Romans allows, for instance, for a good introduction to the themes of justification and redemption and a critical approach to the common atonement model with relation to Rom 3:25. The very debated and sensitive topic is well treated, and the analysis reflects Finlan's earlier interest in the theme that has been the subject of his doctoral dissertation at Durham and of his earlier publications. Among the pseudonymous epistles, the Pastorals are given a good and critical overview; Finlan remarks on the unease of an institutionalized church to deal with the complexity of the Pauline teaching and Paul's subsequent "domestication," the defamation of the opponents, and the conservative approach to social roles.

The last chapters deal briefly with the Pauline elements in Hebrews and other epistles (1 Peter, 1 John), as well as in early Christian writings outside the New Testament (1 Clement, Ignatius, Marcion, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen).

Finlan draws on good literature that includes not only introductions and commentaries but also essays on specific questions that provide insight into many contemporary issues. On the other hand, it is striking that only English/American literature is cited, and German scholarship, for example, that has produced reference works on Pauline scholarship is not referenced. Moreover, some major commentaries written or available in English are not quoted. To mention only the case of the Pastorals, in which the present reviewer is interested, none of the commentaries by Dibelius/Conzelmann, Marshall, Quinn/Wacker, Johnson, Collins, Towner or Witherington are employed (Fiore being probably published after or just when Finlan finished his volume).

To be sure, students and teachers can use the volume with profit, just as those educated, nonspecialist readers who wish to be acquainted with Pauline scholarship. Moreover, the last pages, which show the many different ways in which Paul can be read and used in twenty-first-century scholarship, theology, and religious/ecclesiastical practice, can encourage scholars to consider the implications of an uncritical reading of the Pauline tradition. No doubt, Finlan is right that “Paul can be used in ways that will allow for diversity of understanding or in ways that suppress problems and prevent discussion. Paul can be used to encourage personal and first-hand religious experience or to impose strict conformity” (198). The critique articulated with respect to fundamentalist approaches to Paul is pertinent and compelling.