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Professor Walter F. Taylor Jr. has provided students, scholars, and interested members of the public with an extremely readable introduction to Paul’s life, thought, and letters. All the main issues that one would expect to be dealt with in an introduction to Paul are broadly covered. Taylor’s exposition takes into account different trends in Pauline scholarship and is throughout adherent to a scientific framework, which makes this book particularly valuable for those willing to undertake a critical study of Paul.

Paul: Apostle to the Nations is divided into two parts: (1) “Who Was Paul and What Did He Do?” and (2) “What Did Paul Write?” In part 1 introductory issues about Paul’s life and thought as well as about Pauline hermeneutics are thematically arranged into five chapters. Chapter 1 (“How Can We Study Paul?”) presents an overview of the main hermeneutical perspectives from which Pauline scholarship today approaches the apostle (historical, political, social-scientific, rhetorical, literary, feminist, and theological studies), with basic insights on their presuppositions, goals, and methods.

Chapter 2 (“What Sources Can We Use to Study Paul?”) focuses on the main available sources for the study of Paul: the New Testament letters transmitted under his name and the book of Acts. Concerning the letters, Taylor begins their treatment by considering the
issues of authenticity and pseudonymity, explaining how it is possible to determine their authorship on the basis of their vocabulary, writing style, and theology. Then the figure of Paul is presented as it emerges from the book of Acts. At the end of this chapter Taylor states the method he follows in this book for reconstructing Paul’s life: he used Paul’s authentic letters as the chief source, integrating material from Acts only when it is judged to be historically reliable and accurate.

Chapter 3 (“Where and When Did Paul Live and Work?”) deals with the problem of outlining a biographical narrative of Paul’s life and introduces to the reader the broad political, cultural, and sociological contexts in which Paul operated: the Roman Empire, first-century Mediterranean culture, and the Greco-Roman city. A summary on mobility in the empire, both regarding land and sea travels, is also presented.

Chapter 4 (“What Kind of Person Was Paul?”) aims to put together “the stream of religious, cultural, and educational experiences” (51) shaping Paul’s identity in his own historical setting. In order to do so, Taylor presents the various factors that impacted Paul’s personality as a Judean, a Greco-Roman, and a Christ-believer.

Chapter 5 (“What Did Paul Do?”) focuses on Paul’s missionary activity. Starting from the peculiar social network of the apostle, Taylor explains the peculiar understanding of the house churches Paul founded as a fictive family. Then he illustrates how Paul began and nurtured his congregations. An extensive treatment is devoted to the letters, covering their literary genre, structure, rhetoric, formal and traditional aspects, production, and delivery, thus providing the reader with the necessary information for the next part of the book.

Part 2 is devoted to Paul’s authentic letters, presented in this order: 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, Philemon. Captivating subtitles underscore the main point of each letter (e.g., “1 Thessalonians: The End Is Near—but Not Yet”; “Romans: God Justifies the Ungodly”). In each chapter the reader will find a concise but still complete and consistent introduction to the letter’s content and structure, as well as literary, rhetorical, and sociohistorical aspects of the letter. Significant passages are also commented on when they provide a case study for the exploration of major Pauline themes. The last chapter (“How Did People Develop What Paul Wrote?”) encompasses an overview of the post-Pauline traditions and texts, not only those included in the canon (2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, Acts, 1-2 Timothy, Titus) and that of Ignatius of Antioch, but also those controversial readings of Paul that emerged in second-century Christianity (Marcion, Gnosticism, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, the Pseudo-Clementines).
Several text boxes scattered throughout the book provide quick summaries on debated issues (e.g. “What Did Paul Look Like?”; “Did Paul Have a Wife?”), on critical perspectives (“‘Works of the Law’ and the New Perspective on Paul”), and vocabulary (“The Word Christian”) that are not treated in length in the body of the text. The maps and the good amount of figures that enrich this volume will help readers become familiar with the first-century world in which Paul lived. Moreover, each chapter is appended by “study questions” aiming to stimulate personal reflection and class discussion and by a selected bibliography for those who wish to deepen their knowledge of Paul through further readings. Endnotes, on the other hand, are rich in details providing references to Pauline scholarship, which will be particularly appreciated by advanced readers.

Among the many introductory works that have been published in recent years, Paul: Apostle to the Nations offers three main advantages. First, it exposes issues and matters that every Pauline scholar knows as thorny with outstanding clarity and precision of language, so that they are accessible to beginners without implying an oversimplification. Second, it introduces the reader to the main themes treated by Pauline scholarship within a critical hermeneutical frame: for instance, this is a rare case in which an introductory book uses the expression “Christ-believer” instead of the often misleading “Christian.” In doing so, Taylor encourages readers to assume a critical point of view and to understand Paul’s figure and world in their own terms. Third, it is text-focused: not only does it devotes more than a half of its length to a presentation of the letters of Paul, but its exposition is constantly grounded in Paul’s writings. In Taylor’s own words, “Paul’s theology will arise from study of his writings, rather than being imposed on them” (8).

In sum, this book represents both a profitable tool to be used in class and a highly valuable handbook for scholars who are looking for quick but still accurate and learned references to various aspects of this complex figure. For the same reason, it is highly recommended to every reader who wants to approach Paul from an accurate scientific perspective.