

EXCERPT



Paul and the Giants of Philosophy *Reading the Apostle in Greco-Roman Context*

October 15, 2019 | \$22, 200 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5228-4

How was the apostle Paul influenced by the great philosophers of his age? Dodson and Briones have gathered contributors with diverse views who aim to make Paul's engagement with ancient philosophy accessible. These essays address Paul's interaction with Greco-Roman philosophical thinking on a particular topic, including discussion questions and reading lists to help readers engage the material further.

What Forces Shaped Paul's Intellectual World?

Paul loved conversation. His letters continue conversations that he had begun with the new believers in his churches. In the course of those letters he often constructs imaginary conversations with quick-fire questions and answers to get to the heart of an issue. And behind and beyond those letters we can imagine Paul's innumerable conversations with people he encountered: colleagues, converts, Jews, Greeks, Romans, fellow travelers, fellow artisans, customers, shopkeepers, city magistrates, fellow prisoners, and many more besides. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke pictures Paul in intense conversation wherever he went, sometimes with people who had received an extensive philosophical education. Of course, Paul was a Jew, but Judaism was not hermetically sealed: already for many centuries Jews had spoken Greek, read Greek, and thought in Greek, and even a Jewish Greek-language education would make pupils aware of the central topics and categories that shaped the late Hellenistic culture inhabited by everyone in Paul's day. Paul had learned to be "all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22), finding common ground for conversation, culturally adjusting to his context, and adapting his language for different audiences. His mind was unusually supple and versatile, not least to ensure that the "good news" he announced really came across as "good."

The rich and diverse chapters in this volume create new and significant conversations for that extroverted and talkative apostle. We do not know how far Paul's education extended into direct literary engagement with the giants of Greek and early Roman philosophy, but that is not the point. The conversations created here do not presuppose that Paul had read Aristotle, Cicero, Epictetus, or Seneca: comparison can work very well without a genetic link. The purpose of these chapters is not to prove that Paul knew this or that philosophical idea (though it is certainly possible that he did). Their purpose, rather, is to put Paul into dialogue with other people in his cultural context who thought just as deeply about many of the topics that mattered greatly to him. Every comparison requires some points of similarity to make it worthwhile, some common ground to make the conversation interesting. But what often emerges at the same time is an awareness of difference, and to think carefully about such differences is to expose the underlying assumptions and deep cultural narratives at play beneath the surface of the conversation. Just why does Paul think what he does about suffering, friendship, slavery, communal support, or gift? When we put him alongside others who thought about the same topics and who came out with sometimes similar and sometimes startlingly different conclusions, we get a better grasp of what shapes Paul's thought and why his mind works as it does. Just as we clarify our own ideas and understand our own assumptions better when we argue them through with someone else, so putting Paul into discussion with a variety of conversation partners helps bring to the surface things we had never realized before.

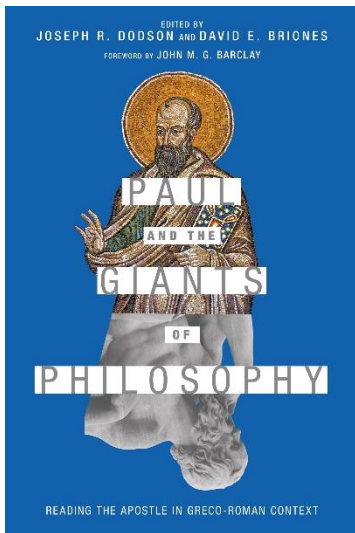
The authors of these chapters have all done firsthand, in-depth research on the topics they bring to our attention. At the same time, they wear their learning lightly, and draw us into their themes with a lightness of touch that makes these chapters easy to read. They, and the editors, are warmly to be thanked for leading us into this room full of such interesting and such varied conversation. If, perhaps, one topic does not interest you greatly, I am sure another will. You will find yourself here introduced to authors and texts you may never have read; some, perhaps, you have not even heard



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about before. That is exciting, like travelling to a country you had never previously visited and getting your head around the different ways they think and speak. I hope one of the effects of this volume is to lead more students to venture out into the great world of ancient philosophical and religious thought, with its sea of fascinating texts and its scintillating range of ideas. Perhaps after this you will pick up a translation of Epictetus, or read one of Seneca's letters or treatises, and see how engaging and interesting they are.

But at the same time, if you are anything like me, you will find here a lot of new insights on Paul that would never have occurred to you had you not seen Paul in this comparative perspective. Numerous times on reading these chapters I have found myself thinking, *I had never thought of that, or I had never seen it that way before*. Prepare to be surprised and intrigued, and from those reactions I hope you will be led to think more clearly, more deeply, and with greater comprehension about that incessant conversationalist, Paul, whose letters keep inviting us, across the centuries, to respond to his provocative discourse.

—Taken from the foreword by John M. G. Barclay



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