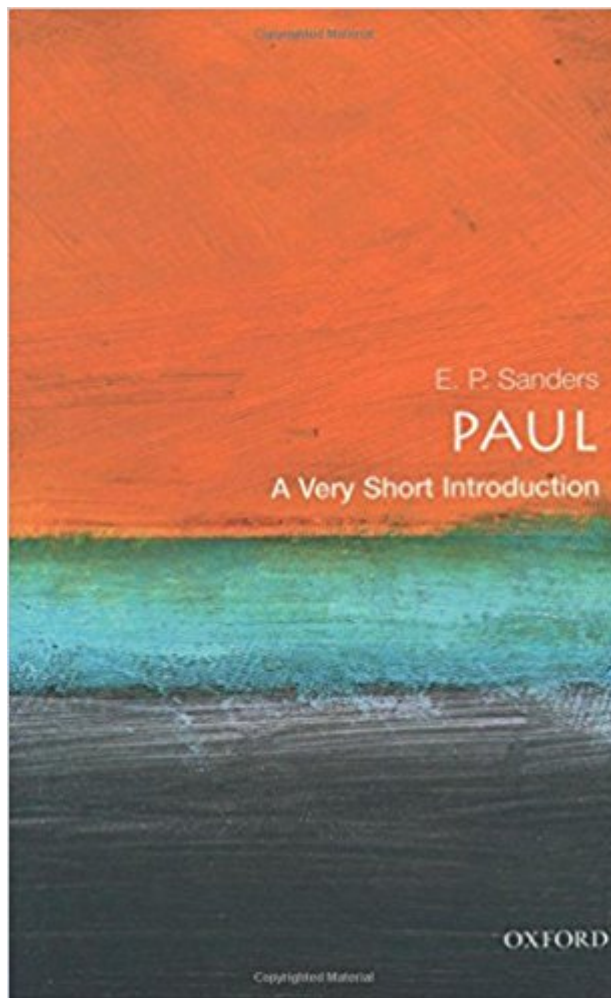


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Paul: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

Missionary, theologian, and religious genius, Paul is one of the most powerful human personalities in the history of the Church. E.P. Sanders, an influential Pauline scholar, analyzes the fundamental beliefs and vigorous contradictions in Paul's thought, discovering a philosophy that is less of a monolithic system than the apostle's convictions would seem to suggest. This volume offers an incisive summation of Paul's career, as well as his role in the development of early Christianity. Both lucid and judicious, it is the most compelling short introduction to Paul now available. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

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Customer Reviews

"An incisive summation of the essentials of Paul's career and role in development of early Christianity. Sanders highlights key elements in Pauline thought."--Harry Rosenberg, Colorado State Univ. "This book is lucid and judicious. It's the most concise introduction to Paul I've seen, and it is excellent as a quick intro at the beginning of a course, preparing the students for further study of Paul's letters themselves."--Jeffrey A. Trumbower, St. Michael's College "This short readable volume is packed with the wisdom and insights of a scholar whose contribution to the field of Pauline studies is respected around the world."--J. Samuel Escobar, Eastern Baptist Theological

Seminary"Written clearly, and the focus is on the most important issues. The 'participation' business is treated well."--David P. Efroymsen, La Salle University

E.P. Sanders is a Professor of Religion at Duke University.

This is without a doubt the clearest short introduction to Paul currently available. Sanders is of course well known for, inter alia, his major works "Paul and Palestinian Judaism", and "Paul, the Law and the Jewish People". Here he presents his view of Paul in a work which, though astonishingly short (after the manner of the 'Very Short Introduction' series in which it takes a distinguished place), manages to say a great deal. The book not only summarizes the conclusions of Sanders's fuller works, but also fills them out in creative ways. This reviewer, having read several of the 'Very Short Introduction' series concerning figures about whom he was previously ignorant, tried to imagine someone coming similarly to this book as their first introduction to Paul. The result is excellent. Anyone, at any level, who wants to make Paul's acquaintance will find this book first-class value.

'Paul, A Very Short Introduction' by the leading American Pauline scholar, E. P. Sanders is a revelation to me it will also probably be a surprise to anyone not familiar with this Oxford University Press series. My first surprise is that an author of such great academic distinction should be doing this kind of treatment which looks, on the surface, to be a popular gloss, evoking images of 'Cliff Notes' and 'Paul for Dummies'. My reading of Pauline theology and exegesis is still a bit shallow; but I know enough already to see that while Sanders may just be covering the peaks, he is giving us a good enough look deep into some of the valleys to appreciate his stating that Paul is a difficult writer for modern readers. Not only was Paul not as polished a writer as his contemporary Philo in Alexandria, he used some Greek terms which simply do not easily translate into English. And, many important modern such as the RSV (Revised Standard Version) Bible translations don't help much when they mangle some of Paul's more important statements. Since practically nothing is known about Paul's life with any certainty, Sanders takes little space for biography and no space on speculation on what Paul may have done, for example, during his early years in the Nabatean desert. Oddly, he does add to the question of where Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans. Some writers say he wrote in Miletus and others say he wrote it in Corinth. Sanders opts for Corinth. Sanders is probably one of the very best writers from which to get the 'non-Lutheran' interpretation of Paul, as he concentrates much more on seeing Paul concentrate on the

membership of Christians in the body of Christ instead of Righteousness by faith. At the very least, he gives the two points of view equal importance. While the book is organized primarily by theological topics, Sanders seems to get most of his quotes and references from Romans and Galatians (which happen to be the two letters most interesting to Luther in his early career). There are two new aspects of Paul I get from this book. First, Paul is NOT an anguished soul, as we have come to view Luther or Kierkegaard or modern existentialists. The second is that for Paul, evil was a real, palpable force in the world. The evil of sin was not an outgrowth of simple guilt, depression, or other psychological phenomenon. Evil was REAL. This gives me a whole new perspective on interpreting the Gnostics, who made a big thing of the doctrine that the physical world was created by an evil demiurge. I also get a reassurance on Paul's doctrine on free will. Unlike Luther in 'Bondage of the Will', Paul firmly believed that humans have free will and can choose right or wrong and disbelief or faith. As excellent as this book is, it may be a bit too technical for a younger teen that is new to problems of reading and interpreting ancient translated texts. If the student is, however, a student of Biblical Greek, then this is a book they should know!

I have studied good biblical scholarship for the past 40 years. I rate E. P. Sanders among the best. His detail work on the letters of Paul is a must reading for anyone wanting to know the development of Paul's thought on righteousness, salvation, his personal issues and conflicts, Paul's relation to Jesus work, the guiding themes in Paul's letters especially in (contrasting) Galatians and Romans, and Paul's Christology. This is well done, illuminating, fresh up-to-date scholarship.

This remains one of the best short introductions to Paul that I've come across, elegantly written by one of the most influential Paul scholars alive. Sanders gives us a deeply insightful analysis of the main features of Paul's life and teaching. The book is not likely to appeal to the already-convinced, but anyone interested in sound historical interpretation and the attempt to get as close to the 'real' Paul as possible, this is a good place to begin.

Oxford's "Very Short Introduction" has its share of hits and misses, but Sanders' introduction to Paul is very good. Sanders is one of the proponents of the so-called "New Perspective" on Paul, a trend within recent Protestant scholarship on Paul. Sanders is a very good, historically sensitive writer, who has written longer, more academic works on the Jewish background of Paul's thought. If you are looking for a quick intro into the thought of a fascinating but sometimes frustrating figure, this is probably your best bet.

I decided to read this book before reading Paul's epistles, hoping the introduction would make Paul easier to read. In retrospect, having now read both this book and Paul's letters shortly thereafter, I think this book might function better as an epilogue read after one is acquainted with Paul's writings. Having read it without much familiarity with Paul's thought and letters, I found E. P. Sanders' relatively dry discussions hard to follow at times. However, as I review over my notes and highlights in writing this brief review, and having now read Paul's letters, I now realize that Sanders actually does a pretty thorough job of covering the essence of Paul's thought. And yet, at times his thoroughness borders on redundancy as particular Pauline topics are explicated numerous times in different places of the text (e.g., Paul's understanding of the law; Paul's understanding of how grace operates; etc.). Ironic for a book series that is built on the idea of being short and concise. I would recommend this book as a supplementary aid to someone who is currently reading or, preferably, has read and is readily familiar with Paul's writings. I fear it may be too technical for someone who has either not read Paul recently or much at all.

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