

Review of Daniel Langton, *The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010.

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The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination concludes with the assessment that “Paul barely registers on the popular Jewish cultural radar” (p. 279). While this may very well be the case regarding “the masses” (p. 289), Paul’s place in Jewish cultural discourse has nevertheless been significant. Langton has organized his work thematically, with sections focusing on three different kinds of approaches to Paul from the domains of: scholarship and theology; art and literature; philosophy and psychoanalysis. The chapters in each section are further subdivided, with segments on the different figures under discussion, and each concludes with a helpful summary account of the preceding material.

A consistent focus of the book across many of its chapters is that the “myth of a Jewish tradition of hostility toward Paul” (p. 23) is just that, a myth. Not only does Langton find little evidence in ancient Jewish literature that Paul was, early on, a particular target of significant criticism, but in fact much of the rest of the material he surveys indicates that Jewish responses to Paul have frequently been appreciative, often ambivalent, but rarely openly hostile. There are important exceptions, of course. These include the occasional references to the apostle in specifically popular venues, like the pages of *The Jewish Chronicle* where Paul exemplifies Jewish “attitudes towards apostasy, towards conversion and Christian missionary work, towards those who abandon or subordinate Torah ... to say nothing of the threat of Jewish self-hatred” (p. 45). Some 19th and 20th century Jewish scholars and thinkers, including Leo Baeck and Martin Buber, take issue with Pauline mysticism, with a perceived Gnostic dimension in Paul’s epistles. Hyam Maccoby’s charges against Paul’s “recent and shallow” Hellenistic understanding of Judaism likewise fit into this camp (p. 76). All of this is indicative of an interest in “building barriers with Paul” (p. 57).

Most of Langton’s other sources, however, try in various ways to “build bridges with Paul” (p. 76). Several New Perspective scholars are to be found in this camp, as are composers and writers such as Felix Mendelssohn and Sholem Asch. The discussion of Asch’s novel, *The Apostle*, is paired with Langton’s interesting analysis of an unpublished piece of Paul fiction, *The Apostle Paul*, by Jewish New Testament scholar Samuel Sandmel. Later chapters focus on Spinoza and Freud, among others. Despite the fact that both of these figures allude to Paul only in passing – in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and *Moses and Monotheism* respectively – Langton does an excellent job of illuminating how Pauline citations function in each.

The book occasionally raises a question quite relevant to recent philosophical Paulinists. In the context of readings such as that of Claude Montefiore, Paul is understood as a thinker of the universal. Contrary to Alain Badiou’s assertions about the radical novelty of Paul’s universal politics, though, Montefiore concludes that “Paul has only smoothed more completely, more definitely, what

... others [e.g., Jonah, Isaiah 51, and several Psalms] had begun to smooth before him” (p. 104). Writing of Mendelssohn’s oratorio *St. Paul*, in which a universalizing “Paul [manifests] . . . a Deist-like admiration of the divine watchmaker,” Langton says: “what is of significance here is that Felix’s particular understanding of Christianity as the path towards universal, rational enlightenment is by no means an obvious emphasis for a treatment of the life of St. Paul” (p. 188). Unfortunately, Langton doesn’t really pursue this angle of critique because he is rather more interested in immediate contextual explanations for such assessments of a Pauline universalism. In the case of Mendelssohn, for instance, Langton notes simply that “it is at least reasonable to suggest that Felix’s conception of religion had been shaped by the Mendelssohn family’s well-documented commitment to rational, universalist religion” (p. 189). This kind of analysis is useful, of course, just relatively uncritical.

Now, in what is essentially a historical survey, the absence of theoretical analysis is perhaps not a major flaw at all. Still, Langton’s emphasis on historical rigor, combined with a focus on the ideological commitments of the figures he discusses, can lead him sometimes to bracket the quality of certain specific Pauline interventions. At various moments, Langton notes potential discrepancies between a particular reading and what can be known about the historical Paul, as when he describes a Medieval text’s take on Paul as an “unhistorical flight of fancy” (p. 33). Only with Spinoza’s Paul, Langton writes, do we have the first indications of “an historically sensitive Jewish self-awareness” (p. 34). When it comes to later writers, for instance Joseph Baruch Shulam, a Messianic Jew who has published a commentary on Romans (*A Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Romans* (Baltimore: Messianic Jewish Publishers, 1998)), there is again reference to the criterion of historical accuracy. Langton explains that Shulam makes “little to no attempt ... to historically situate Paul’s letter or to conduct any kind of source criticism”; and the reason for this might be that “the methodology adopted in [Shulam’s] book resembles in many respects the methodology of postmodern literary theory and the concept of intertextuality” (p. 150). There is nothing obviously polemical or necessarily dismissive in the tone here. Clearly Langton recognizes a value in work that can function as a critical corrective. Still, one could wish that he were less prone to pointing out, in a section regarding “Perspectives Concerned with Gender”, that a scholar like Pamela Eisenbaum is “perfectly in line with progressive Jewish feminist sensibilities” (p. 131); or that Tal Ilan’s work on Paul “further[s] her ideological agenda” (p. 133); or that Amy-Jill Levine’s approach involves a productive “bias” (p. 136). It is not that Langton is incorrect in making any of these comments. Quite the contrary – and I hasten to add that he appreciates the importance of these scholarly efforts. But even if it is excellent that Langton has devoted a section of his book to Jewish feminists, one does wonder if he thinks feminist scholarship on Paul can be ideologically engaged and historically rigorous at the same time.

My admittedly tentative quibbles aside, this volume is a remarkable resource. Langton’s survey of a truly astonishing variety of Jewish perspectives – from the Talmud to Taubes, more or less – on the apostle should be sought out eagerly by anyone interested in the cultural reception of Paul.



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