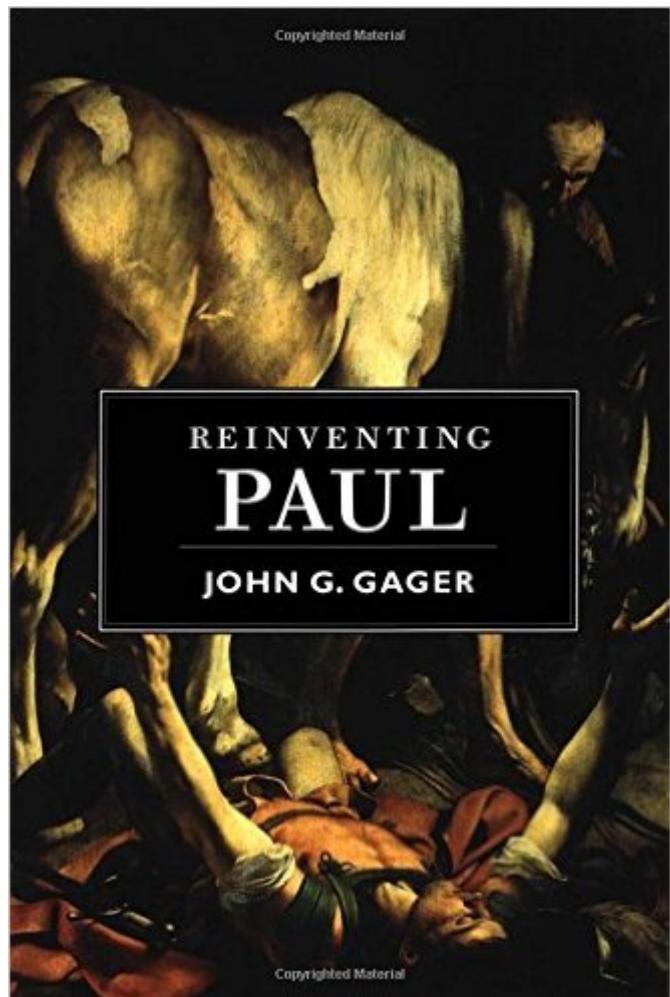


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Reinventing Paul



Synopsis

Throughout the Christian era, Paul has stood at the center of controversy, accused of being the father of Christian anti-Semitism. In this highly accessible book, John Gager challenges this entrenched view of Paul, arguing persuasively that Paul's words have been taken out of their original context, distorted, and generally misconstrued. Using Paul's own writings, Gager brilliantly sets forth a controversial interpretation of the apostle's teaching as he takes us in search of the "real" Paul. Through an exhaustive analysis of Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans, he provides illuminating answers to the key questions: Did Paul repudiate the Law of Moses? Did he believe that Jews had been rejected by God and replaced as His chosen people by Gentiles? Did he consider circumcision to be necessary for salvation? And did he expect Jews to find salvation through Jesus? Gager tells us that Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles, not the Jews. His most vehement arguments were directed not against Judaism but against competing apostles in the Jesus movement who demanded that Gentiles be circumcised and conform to Jewish law in order to be saved. Moreover, Paul relied on rhetorical devices that were familiar to his intended audience but opaque to later readers of the letters. As a result, his message has been misunderstood by succeeding generations.

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Customer Reviews

"Reinventing Paul" is John Gager's attempt to solve one of the most vexing problems of New Testament scholarship: Saint Paul's seeming anti-Judaism, if not outright anti-Semitism. The view that Paul (and God!) turned against his own people had been considered self-evident to a long line

of scholars and theologians stretching back at least to St. Augustine. But the history of the 20th century, soaked copiously with the blood of innocent Jews, made many New Testament scholars hope that a less Jew-hating Paul could be salvaged from Paul's writing. Gager reviews the roots of traditional view of Paul -- the "obvious" view discerned by the casual modern reader of the New Testament. Saul/Paul in this view is an observant Jew who is converted to Christianity by a miraculous experience of the Risen Christ, and who then proceeds to condemn his own people based on their "rejection" of Jesus as the promised Messiah. Gager re-examines this view in the light of new scholarship and new attitudes since the Shoah. How can Paul, he asks, "convert" to a faith that does not yet exist? Paul's conversion is an event that is "read back" into his story based on the post-70 CE split of Judaism and Christianity. Paul, whose Damascus Road experience dates to the years immediately following Christ's crucifixion in 30 CE, would not have thought of his experience as a conversion **from** Judaism, but at most from one expression of Judaism to another. But what of Paul's seeming citations against Jews and Judaism? Gager's thesis is that Paul's enemies were not Christ-denying Jews, but Christ-**affirming** Jews within the Jesus movement. To Paul, these Jewish-born Christians misunderstood the meaning of Christ's death, which to Paul was the way that God extended salvation from the Jews to the Gentiles.

Gager's text, "Reinventing Paul" is perhaps mislabeled, as he does less re-inventing than "recovering." With the sort of exasperation characteristic of E.P. Sanders' in "Paul and Palestinian Judaism" Gager dismantles, by way of a thorough review of recent Pauline scholarship, the age-old distortions of Paul and first century Judaism that have plagued Christianity from the outset. His dismay is easily understood as he makes plain the way that Paul, the "Apostle to the Gentiles" was forced into the role of "Paul, critic of all that is Jewish." (my phrase) Indeed, the only regret that I had as I read his book was that he seemed unaware of the groundbreaking work of Mark Nanos' "The Mystery of Romans." Nanos' work would only have bolstered Gager's conclusions, but from a Jewish perspective. It is no longer excusable for Christian students of the New Testament to set Paul up as an opponent of the "straw man" of Pharisaic Judaism created in the late 19th century and utterly discredited by Sanders, George Foote Moore, and Charlotte Klein. In concise form, Gager has catalogued the breaches in the dam of tradition that will, one hopes, lead to its imminent collapse. The hope, however, falters briefly when one reads critiques of Gager's book that seek to cite brief passages from Romans or Galatians once again as support for Paul's rejection of the meaningfulness of Torah for Jews of his day. Still the misrepresentations of the Judaism of that day raise their misshapen heads to perpetuate the abuses of the past. His analysis of Romans and

Galatians, while hardly exhaustive, give us an exciting taste of the benefits of real rhetorical analysis of Paul's letters, without weighing the reader down with excessive jargon.

Gager could perhaps be starting a quest similar in intent if not in form to that of the Jesus Seminar, namely, the search for the 'real' Paul, or at least the 'real meaning' of Paul. Paul has been reinterpreted and recast in many ways over the past 2000 years, for denominational and sociological reasons. To build upon Schweitzer's observations about the changing images of Jesus, just as each age reinterprets Jesus to, in one way or another, recast Jesus in the image of that age, so too does Paul undergo a similar change. What Gager is doing, however, is not merely reinterpreting the meaning of Paul -- he is offering a new way of asking the interpretative questions, offering a paradigm shift that casts doubts upon traditional interpretations and offers a new way of thinking about the texts. Once we begin to question not just specific texts or issues within that paradigm, but the paradigm itself, nothing in the old model makes sense. (Gager, p. 145)

Traditional View

Gager specifically does not want to start a 'Quest for the Historical Paul' a la the Jesus Seminar model, but does feel that re-examination is necessary to shift emphasis away from traditionally-held views of Paul. Even if such a search for the 'real' Paul is not undertaken, due to the lack of 'reality' in such a search, this does not mean that there are not bad interpretations, even wrong ones when it comes to examining Pauline literature for intent, background, and context. (Gager, pp. vii-viii)

Traditionally, Paul is turned into a sort of universal preacher; the particular advice and conversations he has in his letters to specific communities made into universally applicable principles and precepts.

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