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Bruce Chilton. *Rabbi Paul: An Intellectual Biography*. New York: Doubleday, 2004. Pp. xvi + 335. Hardcover, \$24.95.

[1] Several features manifest the popular appeal of this work. The cover is impressive. Notes and bibliography are kept to a minimum. Chilton writes in a lively style replete with contractions, even in the biblical citations. He heads his chapters with flashy titles such as “The Ephesian Catapult” and “Greek Fire.” He makes several jokes about circumcision, and goes farther than Luke (author of Acts of the Apostles) in depicting vivid action scenes. For instance, when Paul is stoned at Lystra, he is first stripped naked and thrown off a cliff (123), none of which appears in Acts, but that is the way stoning is described in the Mishnah (written 150 years later).

[2] Given this popular appeal, the historian might overlook the anachronistic title *Rabbi Paul*. Nowhere in ancient literature is Paul called “Rabbi,” and Chilton is aware that “Rabbi” was not yet an institutional title (xiii). But Chilton wishes to draw attention to Paul’s Jewish-ness, as he did with Jesus in his earlier work, *Rabbi Jesus*. His presentation of Paul’s Jewish-ness makes this work of interest to the *Journal of Religion & Society*. But given the importance of the relationship of Paul to Judaism for Chilton, it is surprising that he does not engage the new perspective on Paul coming from scholars such as Stanley Stowers, Lloyd Gaston, John Gager, and Mark Nanos. He cites the work of the person who began the revisionist movement, namely Krister Stendahl and his ground breaking “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” but Chilton continues to read Romans 7:14-20 as autobiographic and introspective, which was precisely what Stendahl argued it was not.

[3] I had hoped that this book would be a worthy replacement of Günther Bornkamm’s magisterial *Paul* (ET London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971). Chilton satisfies this hope in many ways. His vivid depictions of the architecture and culture of the ancient Mediterranean world provide a fitting backdrop for the story of Paul. He places more adequate emphasis on the importance of apocalyptic eschatology for Paul (as urged by J. Christiaan Beker), and also on the importance of the visionary mystical tradition of First Century Judaism for understanding Paul’s experience of the risen Christ (as in Alan Segal’s *Paul the Convert*). He places appropriate emphasis on the importance of the Resurrection for Paul and First

Century Christianity, and describes in moving terms the impact of the salvation experience as Paul would communicate it to his listeners. He does not present Paul as “converting from Judaism,” and carefully avoids the *Law versus Gospel* or *Ritual versus Ethics* polarities of many earlier works on Paul (reflecting E. P. Sanders’ insights). He sees Paul as influenced by Stoicism, but thoroughly Jewish, nonetheless. He takes Acts of the Apostles as an important source for information about Paul, while fully aware that the genuine letters are more immediate sources. Drawing from John Ashton, he deals seriously with phenomena like exorcism, miracle working, and speaking in tongues in the life of the early church. And finally, he includes in his presentation of Paul a description of how the deutero-Pauline literature was produced, namely Colossians, Ephesians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, and even Hebrews.

[4] Yet in his effort to engage the popular readers’ market, Chilton has departed from the caution demanded of an historian. Conjectures with little or no support appear on nearly every page, yet Chilton rarely resorts to words like “may have” or “perhaps.” His reliance on Acts of the Apostles is excessive. He sometimes takes dialogue or speeches as direct or nearly direct reports. At times his narrative was an amplified version of Acts of the Apostles, but with more, rather than fewer, touches of color and humor.

[5] Chilton’s characterization of Paul is highly controversial. He presents Paul as a radical individualist - reflective more of a personality from the Renaissance or later, than of a First Century person. A selective sampling follows:

- “Perpetually restless, reckless with his own life and the lives of others, Paul careened around the Mediterranean . . . wrecking the tranquility of synagogues, forums, churches, making friends and breaking friendships with the compulsive abandon of a man possessed” (xv).
- “Ruthless independence shaped his personality from first to last” (14).
- “[Paul’s] apocalypse burned away any sense of diplomacy he might once have had” (58).
- “An intuitive and brilliant thinker, [Paul] was a dreadful judge of people and situations” (122).
- “Success bred ambition in Paul, as it does in most intellectuals” (197).
- “Despite his inexperience and disinclination [Paul] appoints himself the Ephesian Dr. Ruth . . . The promptings of the Spirit and his own personal preferences got mixed up in his mind within his role as an apostolic teacher” (211). “. . . in some ways, everyone was supposed to behave as if they had come from Tarsus” (214).
- “In Ephesus Paul was as full of himself as he was with the Holy Spirit” (216).
- “[Paul’s] claims may seem outlandish and abusive, but they come without a shred of circumspection” (228).

[6] Chilton consistently presents Paul as under the sway of certain strong personalities, namely, Gamaliel, Caiaphas, Peter, James, Barnabas, and Silas, who dominate a rather needy and cloying Paul. My fundamental concern with this characterization is its dissonance with

the message of Paul. Chilton acknowledges “despite his drawbacks, Paul is the most successful religious teacher history has ever known” (128), and he closes the book with a ringing peroration of Paul as the first in a chain of great Christian mystics. But the man he describes looks more like a pushy, eccentric, modern day academic. To be sure, great people have foibles, but the drawbacks of Paul as he describes them render him a hypocrite and undermine the argument that Paul experienced any success as an apostle. In the ancient world the character of a speaker was judged more rigorously than in today’s mass-media culture. One has to ask, “Who would be persuaded by a man as duplicitous, over-bearing, and opportunistic as the Paul that Chilton describes?” The dynamic tension between opposites (e.g., *weakness and strength*, *freedom and responsibility*, *already and not yet*) that pervades Paul’s thought has been mistaken for contradiction; his epistolary rhetoric for bravado and ill temper.

[7] There are many questions about the life of Paul that scholars have debated over the years. A signal feature of this book is that Chilton presents such issues as though they were settled. For instance, was Paul actually in Jerusalem studying under Gamaliel? Yes, says Chilton. He studied in Jerusalem for four years (Why four years?), and he came under the sway of Caiaphas during that time. What *was* the famous “thorn in the flesh” of 2 Corinthians 12:7? It was “herpes zoster,” an affliction of the eyes aggravated by stress. “Bulging, inflamed, and searing [his eyes] felt like thorns in his head during the attacks” (61). Are the reports of the meeting in Jerusalem told in Galatians 2:1-10 and Acts 15:6-29 reconcilable? Chilton explains it as three meetings: 1) a general meeting at which Paul, in a shameless betrayal of his constituents, did not speak up because he was so enthralled with James; 2) a private meeting of Paul with James, Peter, and John as described in Gal 2:1-10; and 3) another meeting where James asserted rules for Gentile/Jewish table fellowship (133-46). At no point does Chilton acknowledge the speculative character of this reconstruction, and much depends on his pet theory of Paul being enthralled with James, not to mention the accuracy of Luke. Was Paul actually a Roman citizen? Not only is that not in dispute, but Chilton asserts “Paul wore the toga, but only occasionally” (25). The famous unutterable message that Paul received in a vision (2 Corinthians 12:4), which most scholars do not identify since Paul himself never did, is disclosed by Chilton as simply, “Those who believed and were baptized were ‘the Israel of God’” (119). Could someone like Apollos actually be preaching Christianity without the Holy Spirit (as related in Acts 19:1-7)? “Of course,” says Chilton, and this required that Apollos baptized his listeners repeatedly (177). What did Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 4:21 when he threatened the Corinthians with a stick? There is no question for Chilton; Paul was threatening them with his exorcistic power (202). Finally, why does Acts end where it does? For Chilton, this too is clear. Luke had to end Acts with the house arrest of Paul because a description of Nero as Paul’s killer would hurt his portrayal of the compatibility of Christianity with the Roman Empire, but also James was killed in 62 and so the entire link between Christianity and the Temple in Jerusalem was severed, and this would be a very bad note on which to end (247).

[8] This last example points to one of many rather unique theories by which Chilton sorts out Paul’s relations with other important figures. He places great stress on the figure of James, whom he refers to as a “Senior Rabbi” - his translation of *presbyteros* in Acts 15:6. He argues that James was a Nazirite, who lived near the Temple, and wore linen (information he

has accepted uncritically from Eusebius and Jerome - Josephus only tells us that James was killed) and that James “made this ritual [the Nazirite vow] characteristic among Jesus’ followers” (136). James had his resurrection experience during a period of Nazirite fasting. All of this explains why he gets Paul to participate in a Nazirite vow in Acts 21. James, like so many other great men in Chilton’s book, exercises domination over Paul during his ministry. Paul is basically working James’s agenda in 1 Thessalonians (163), and whenever Paul is taking collections in Asia Minor and Greece it is for the Nazirites in Jerusalem. This is highly speculative, nearly as speculative as his earlier remark about Caiaphas: “co-opting a young rabbi [Paul] out of Gamaliel’s stable (sic) must have given Caiaphas pleasure” (46).

[9] Perhaps Chilton’s purpose was to get people to break away from more sober or traditional understandings of Paul. We occasionally need to have our blinders tweaked. But, that said, I would hesitate to recommend this work to someone seeking to understand Paul or his relationship to Judaism.

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