

BOOK REVIEW

'Plastic' 'Paul': Self-Writing and the Writing-Self

Nicholas P. Greco

Scott S. Elliott, *The Rustle of Paul: Autobiographical Narratives in Romans, Corinthians, and Philippians* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

What does it mean to approach a biblical text like the apostle Paul's letters as 'readerly' texts, that is, texts that resist meaning for instability? What of the 'project' of religious texts as guides for religious praxis and life? At the core of this study is the question of who 'Paul' is. Are the passages that lay readers attribute to the person named Paul and referred to as the apostle of Christ actually his? What does it mean for Paul to be writing autobiographically (as Elliott explores in the first chapter, the nature of autobiography)? Is he only defining himself in relation to something else? Are those passages authentic? And does that even matter? Elliott writes, 'the writer [Paul] remains hard to trust between presence and absence, dispersed and caught in an infinite network of relations, stretched across the surface of so many texts' (p. 139).

Elliott begins his book by quoting from a September 2011 article that suggests that the French look at the Tour de France as 'a language unto itself, a chain of signification.' Elliott continues by stating that Barthes himself thought the Tour was 'a total and ambiguous myth', as opposed to what is expounded in the article. For Elliott, the Christian writer Paul is like the Tour de France, an 'overwrought mythology' (pp. 1-2). That is, Paul is a product, like plastic. He is manufactured, a composite, a construction (Elliott likens 'Paul' to Barthes' 'plastic' in *Mythologies*) (p. 68).

The biblical writer Paul, though, is, as posthumous, already myth, in that one cannot expect a reply from him. What Elliott is getting at here is that Paul is seeking 'transience and liberty through writing' (pp. 3-4). About Paul, Elliott writes, 'He and the world in which he lived are reconstructions

fabricated on the basis of what we perceive as traces and remainders we find in letters and other writings attributed or otherwise linked to him in that world' (p. 13). This very uncertainty or unfixedness is what might make Barthes' ideas attractive. Elliott states that his book 'reads the writer of the letters to the Romans, the Corinthians, and the Philippians, in conversation with Barthes, in order to analyze the writer as a text' (pp. 5-6). Wittingly, Elliott is concerned with Paul's 'self-writing and the writing-self', that is, Paul in the letters (p. 19).

In addition, Elliott wishes to 'write' Paul, and to not have Paul present in the book at all. Elliott suggests that Barthes would have it no other way (p. 30). Furthermore, Elliott contends that Paul, like Barthes' Eiffel Tower, is an 'empty signifier', a 'degree zero moment' (quoting from Knight). Interestingly, Elliott suggests that the text also can contain a 'punctum', that uncodifiable element that catches the viewer in photographs (from Barthes' *Camera Lucida*). Each one of these 'breaks the surface of the text', reminding the reader that an actual writer exists there (p. 84).

This is a highly theoretical work that is a challenge to read, and requires of the reader a wide knowledge of both biblical studies, with a certain understanding of Pauline texts, and a conversant understanding of Barthes' concepts, whether they be 'the grain of the voice' or the Neutral. While these are not minor parts of Barthesian thought, most readers (even if they are academics) would not be familiar with them. None of this is to say that there is nothing worthwhile in Elliott's study. On the contrary, there is much that is useful and of interest, especially for Pauline scholars who are desiring novel approaches to important (and foundational) biblical texts. In many ways, Elliott is attempting to question the role of Paul as an author, and how the reader – and Christian believer, who finds theological truth in Paul's letters – should approach the author, as 'insubstantive [...], insignificant, and impermanent' (p. 45).

Barthes himself did refer to the biblical text (his citation of the biblical story of Lazarus in *Mourning Diary* is a late example of this). It would have been interesting to consider Barthes' own perspective on the nature of authorship and authority of biblical texts, though perhaps that subject is too far removed from Paul, and Elliott's greater project.

In an endorsement on the back of the book, Matthew Waggoner writes that the book is about taking pleasure in the texts of Paul. This is something that such a study emphasizes: that there should be a sense of pleasure in

reading and writing Paul. For some, a biblical text is not *only* a text that can be the subject of theoretical musings, but those musings do work to open the text, moving it from its 'readerly' status (as a canonical work, to be able to, for instance, determine a 'missionary strategy', such as is analyzed in 1 Cor. 9:19-23 for Elliott's Chapter 3) to 'writerly', allowing space for the mystery of the numinous to work.

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