**Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates** by N. T. Wright (Fortress Press)

*Paul and His Recent Interpreters* is a companion volume to N. T. Wright's *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* and *Pauline Perspectives*. In the course of this survey, Wright asks searching questions of all of the major contributors to Pauline studies in the last fifty years.

The author, N. T. Wright, the former Bishop of Durham in the Church of England and one of the world's leading Bible scholars, is now Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St. Andrews and is a regular broadcaster on radio and television. He is the author of over sixty books.

According to Wright, the old debates in Pauline studies are still going on; many still pursue them energetically. But the landscape has changed completely. *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* tries to describe that change; even to explain it. Part of the aim of the book is to place the very different worlds of Pauline discussion side by side, and to suggest that they might like to talk to one another.

Wright says that the main geographical focus of New Testament scholarship in general and Pauline research in particular has shifted in his lifetime from Germany to America. This has coincided with a serious glut in production. Discussions both serious and trivial appear every day on the Internet; monographs flood the markets. This makes generalization impossible.

A different sort of shift has taken place which creates the social and cultural conditions for some of the key elements in the story *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* tells. In the 1960s, most people who wrote about Paul (there were important exceptions) stood within some kind of Christian confession. Now a good deal of biblical research, particularly in the United States, happens in faculties of `religion'. People in that environment sometimes hint that this setting makes their work `objective', by comparison with the `subjective' or faith-driven work of seminaries, `divinity schools', or even the church itself.

This shift to America, and to `religious studies', has had many spin-offs when it comes to understanding the big picture of Paul and his thought. Two of the early flagships of the movement are still important; *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* highlights one in Part I and the other in Part III.

Since the 1970s and 1980s there have emerged several new schools of Pauline thought in America in particular. Part of the problem faced by
students and teachers alike is that these have often been conducted in isolation, both from one another and from the earlier framing debates. Readers need a map, and *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* provides one. The three main Parts of the book exemplify the point. In Part I, after the opening chapters setting the scene, readers meet the so-called `new perspective', commonly held to be launched in 1977 by the work of E. P. Sanders. In the second Part, they examine the revival of so-called `apocalyptic' interpretations of Paul, associated with J. C. Beker's work of 1980 and J. L. Martyn's 1997 commentary on Galatians. In the third Part, they examine a wider range of discussions centering upon Paul's social and cultural context, a movement whose main flagship remains the 1983 work of Wayne A. Meeks. These three movements have run in parallel for a generation. Each has pursued its own agenda without much reference to the others.

The three main areas, which are the focal points of the three Parts of *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, subdivide further. Wright lists ten such subdivisions; there are undoubtedly many others. Part I addresses the first four; Part II, the fifth; Part III, the last five.

1. The so-called `new perspective on Paul' is regularly associated with the work of Sanders. Sanders's work points to a particular sub-category, namely the study of Paul's own religion.
2. The `new perspective' has prompted a sharp response. This has now gained its own momentum, often calling itself the `old perspective', and often operating with minimal reference to any of the other categories. It has continued earlier debates about the nature and centre of Pauline theology.
3. Within a broadly `new perspective' reading of Paul, there have been major developments in areas such as Paul's use of Israel's scriptures.
4. Sanders's work has rightly been seen as giving new impetus to the study of Paul as a Jew. How did he relate to the Jewish world in which he had grown up? What difference did his Messiah-belief make?
5. One of the most vigorous recent movements, at least in America, has been the attempt to see Paul as an `apocalyptist'. This movement, focused on J. L. Martyn's commentary on Galatians, has become popular among theologians as well as exegetes. Since Wright's work in many ways cuts across the line taken by Martyn and his followers, he engages in head-on debate with this whole school in a more direct way, in Part II, than he does with the writers surveyed in Parts I and III.
6. The study of Paul's social world, with Meeks's 1983 book *The First Urban Christians* as a flagship, has continued unabated. How can readers appropriately describe Paul's communities, and what
conclusions can they draw from that about their beliefs and self-identity?

7. This vigorous movement has itself subdivided, into what may be called the `social history' branch, represented by Meeks himself, and the `social-anthropological' branch exemplified by the work of the self-styled `Context Group'. The latter bring their anthropological analysis of the `Mediterranean world' to Paul, whereas Meeks and his followers prefer to work from the ground up.

8. When readers put `apocalyptic' and `social context' together, they ought to expect `political' readings of Paul, and that is what they find in another whole wave of studies, though these are not usually joined up with the worlds of Martyn or Meeks. Here again there is a subdivision. Horsley and others, writing from within the North American context, have explored the possible relation between Paul and `empire'.

9. While, in Europe, radical philosophers have explored Paul's potential relevance for their ongoing contemporary political dilemmas. This exploration mostly ignores, and is ignored by, the other categories with which it would seem to share much in common.

10. Others have explored Paul's links with the philosophical movements of his own day. This research would ideally link arms with all the other categories above; in practice this has not usually happened!

These ten movements are all alive and well at the time of writing, but with a few exceptions they are not really talking to one another. **Paul and His Recent Interpreters** is, in part, a plea that they ought to do so, difficult though that may be. Wright says he hopes that by distinguishing these various strands of thought, and placing them within at least a sketchy social history of scholarship, he gives readers coming to Pauline studies at least a sense of the territory, and hints as to possible connections and overlaps which the detailed focus of so much scholarship sometimes ignores.

**Paul and His Recent Interpreters** not only maps a large and complex area of scholarly terrain for its own sake, but also explains why certain topics have loomed so large in Wright’s own work, why some issues have become particularly important, and why certain problems now demand a fresh angle of vision.

Like the moon, **Paul and His Recent Interpreters** is intended to circle its parent volume, shedding a varied and pleasant light on it, now from this angle, now from that. Unlike the parent volume, it aims at being as lean as is compatible with a helpful sketch of the chosen terrain. Thus some topics are missing entirely. Wright does not discuss Paul's so-called `conversion';
nor the standard questions about Pauline chronology, the relationship between the letters and Acts, or the authorship of disputed letters. Nor has he engaged with the other surveys which have appeared from time to time, all of which struggle, as does the present volume, with the confusing plethora of new lines of investigation and angles of vision.

Only Tom Wright could set his hand to write a large-scale critical review of recent scholarship on Paul and produce a page-turner. This is a thoroughly engrossing and deeply illuminating account of major developments in Pauline studies by one of the world's leading Pauline scholars. This book, one of Wright's best, is a must-read for those engaged in advanced study of Paul. – Edward Adams, King's College London

In the last two hundred years only one other survey of biblical scholarship ranks with this book: the blockbuster The Quest of the Historical Jesus by Albert Schweitzer. Most surveys assume neutrality in order to examine the scholarship objectively, but both Schweitzer and Wright convert surveys of scholarship into scholarship itself.... And, like Schweitzer, Wright writes up a report with the kind of prose that prevents the reader from putting the book down. – Scot McKnight, Northern Seminary

A judicious study on Pauline scholarship by the man who has arguably done more than any other in recent decades to shape it. Here is a venerable museum of watershed publications, interpretative revolutions, and scholarly counter-revolutions. By evaluating the past of Pauline studies, Wright sets the agenda for its future. – Michael F. Bird, Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia

A masterly survey, Paul and His Recent Interpreters is essential reading for all with a serious interest in Paul, the interpretation of his letters, his appropriation by subsequent thinkers, and his continuing significance today.