

Paul: A Novel, *by Walter Wangerin Jr.*

reviewed by [Jill Peláez Baumgaertner](#) in the [August 2, 2000](#) issue

The uneasy genre of biblical fiction often includes what Flannery O'Connor called the "shoddy religious novel," filled with shallow characters and plot structures as clichéd and melodramatic as 1950s biblical films. The authors of these books are often squeamish about ambiguity and are primarily interested in dramatizing portions of scripture in a 20th-century idiom suitable for commercial television. Walter Wangerin Jr. defies the stereotype and redeems the genre.

Any writer of biblical fiction must become involved in the tricky activity of biblical interpretation. Wangerin's approach allows the kind of imaginative play with the text that is necessary for any real artist retelling scriptural story. For example, Wangerin recounts Paul's blinding on the road to Damascus from the point of view of the skeptic, Jude, thereby creating a tension between belief and unbelief which expands rather than restricts the story. Paul's newly found freedom from the Torah finds specific expression in the marketplace as he savors a slice of roast pig, much to the amazement of Barnabas, who relates other ecstasies associated with the freedom of the gospel. Timothy's knowledge of Greek and Roman myth allows Wangerin to develop ideas about the power of story—two of his longtime interests. Most impressive is the way Wangerin draws on current biblical scholarship and his own imaginative engagement with the text while always remaining grounded in the scriptural texts themselves.

The book is divided into 98 chapters, told from the viewpoint of various characters, including Prisca, Barnabas, James, Luke, Jude, Rhoda, Titus, Timothy and Paul himself. The voice of Seneca, the Roman philosopher, statesman and author, provides the historical context of Nero's court. The power of this narrative technique lies in the cumulative effect of the juxtaposition, contrast and repetition of so many points of view.

When Paul speaks in his own narrative chapters, it is in the familiar voice of his letters to the Galatians, Romans, Corinthians or Ephesians. However, seen from the point of view of other characters, Paul is presented in ways that go outside the boundaries of the biblical text. He is noisy, gregarious and irascible, alienating some

of his closest friends with his stubbornness on issues like circumcision and dietary laws. When Paul expresses his own point of view, the familiar words of the Pauline letters acquire new meaning because of the imaginative context Wangerin has created. The novel weaves itself into one's reading of the Pauline letters in the same way that *Paradise Lost* colors scripture for those who have read Milton. The biblical text comes to life with new possibilities. Is Wangerin's book fiction or theology? Well, it's both.

Wangerin is a Lutheran pastor, and his work does reveal some Lutheran emphases, as in Prisca's interpretation of Paul's love of paradox: "Paul liked these holy conundrums, these human impossibilities, contrarities that baffled the world, because it was Jesus alone who made them possible: 'to be struck down,' for example, 'but not destroyed. To be punished to death and yet not dead.' Or as Paul cried out in the street one day: 'We're dying, dying! And behold, we live!'" And the theology of the cross and of the two kingdoms infuses the entire book. Occasionally, one seems to hear Luther in Paul's words, which creates a dizzying sense of a reality beyond historical chronology.

I wondered how Wangerin would handle some of the more problematic passages from Paul's letters, especially his teachings on women. In this area Wangerin takes certain liberties which are almost convincing. Concerned to show Paul's ministry as a process over time, Wangerin suggests that Paul's ideas on the subject of women might have changed and developed, an intriguing notion which occasionally promises a bit more than it can deliver. He portrays Paul admitting to Prisca that until he saw Lydia preach and lead worship, he thought women should always remain silent. The experience changed his mind. The scene feels contrived, however, and becomes more so when Prisca's husband, Aquila, surprises her by beginning to serve the meal. This late 20th-century gesture of male liberation seems strained, although one must credit the author for a valiant attempt to deal with text that does not allow much wiggle room.

In the main, this novel masterfully integrates theological thinking, historical research and artistic rendering. It does more than merely play a biblical story for its imaginative possibilities; it presents what one thought one knew about scripture in such a way that it becomes a new exploration.