

GAZETTE BOOKS

STAR RATINGS: ★★★★★ OUTSTANDING ★★★★★ EXCELLENT ★★★ GOOD ★★ AVERAGE ★ DISAPPOINTING

BOOKS OF THE WEEK MURRAY SAYLE

The Gospel truth about Saint Paul?



Paul: The Mind of the Apostle
by AN Wilson

Sinclair-Stevenson £17.99

★★★★



James the Brother of Jesus
by Robert Eisenman

Faber £25

★★★



What Saint Paul Really Said
by Tom Wright

Lion £4.99

★

Long the mother of all bestsellers, the Bible is again a hot literary ticket. Novelist, journalist and amateur theologian AN Wilson, whose 1992 biography of Jesus found a wide audience, rings the bell again with his account of the Apostle Paul, the architect, as Wilson points out, of the religion known to us as Christianity. His new book *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* is, in a way, a deeper, more stimulating read.

Jesus will always be an indistinct figure, trailing glory, perhaps, but so swathed in symbol and prophecy as to defy the insight we have into our friends and neighbours. Wilson's Paul is a real man, who jumps out of the New Testament (of its 27 books and letters, 18 are from, or about, him) and whom we would recognise at church next Sunday: inspired, bald, bow-legged and so sawn-off that he could leave Damascus in a basket and was thus known in his new faith as Paulus, engagingly translated as 'Shorty'.

Which of them was the 'founder' of the Christianity we know today? The question has generated much heat, especially among publishers' publicity persons. After God, Jesus

is obviously its central figure but, as Wilson writes and a weekend of Bible reading (this one would be appropriate) will confirm, 'the essence of the Gospels... the notion of a spiritual saviour, at odds with his own kind and his own people, but whose death on the cross was a sacrifice for sin, is a wholly Pauline creation'.

Paul, the Bible says, was born a Jew named Saul, spoke Greek as his everyday language, and worked as a tent-maker, a supplier of military housing to the only customer, the Roman army, with a sideline informing on troublemakers within the Jewish community. Paul himself tells us how he was seized by a vision of the risen Redeemer on the road to Damascus. From this point in Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles we can follow the busy saint on his have-awl-will-travel business trips, as he sets out to organise what became our Christian church.

Wilson lucidly explains how Saul/Paul/Shorty came by the insights that made Christianity viable for the multi-racial Roman Empire: the God of the Hebrews is the God of all humanity and, believing the End of Days was at hand, Paul taught that there was no time, or need, for male non-Jews to undergo circumcision, to keep the Jewish dietary code, or even to marry and have children.

With time so short, all humanity stood in dire need of the moral truths of Judaism (the same truths Jesus preached): 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus,' as Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28.

Paul's vision unlocked the spiritual treasures of Judaism for us all, which historically has meant mostly for Europeans. But he also left us the passions and prejudices of the first Christian century (or, as Wilson suspects, they were written in by well-meaning compilers or copyists). Many Jews objected to a Jew preaching that the faith of their fathers had been superseded, and



Detail of a triptych by Bartolomeo Vivarini depicting apostles Paul (left) and Peter

they rejected – sometimes violently – Paul and his non-Jewish converts.

Shameful anti-Semitism crept into Paul's religion, to the absurdity of blaming the death of Jesus on 'the Jews', as though Jesus himself was not a Jew – a hatred as unacceptable in the late 20th Century as Paul's easy acquiescence to slavery was in the 19th. We are no longer comfortable with the twisting of Paul's words to give women a lesser role in life or the faith, either. In short, as well as a religious genius, Wilson's Paul was a tent-maker of his time, preaching a spiritual crash course that, in the event, was never needed.

Paul and his followers fell out, the Gospels tell us, not only with old-line Jews but also with other emerging strands of Christianity. One such, flourishing in Jerusalem itself, was led by Jesus's own brother,

James (Paul himself never met the earthly Jesus).

Robert Eisenman's *James the Brother of Jesus* makes a penitential read, but he brings together much new evidence, from textual analysis and archaeology, about this purely Jewish kind of Christian revelation. This kept to Judaism's strict monotheism, austerity, dietary laws and circumcision – teachings which its earliest members must have heard from the Master himself. The Christianity of James eventually died out, or was suppressed but a faith spiritually descended from it is still alive. Its followers call it Submission (to the will of God) or, in Arabic, Islam.

As Eisenman and Wilson have found, any attempt to unravel the roots of early Christianity generates controversy. Wilson's quest through Paul for the source of Christianity in

► ABOUT THE AUTHORS

AN Wilson, the celebrated journalist, went to theological college, then rejected Christianity, denounced book reviewing, then became a literary editor. On the record as disliking personal publicity, he's never out of the headlines and is now one of the voices of the nation. Robert Eisenman is a professor at California University and an expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls. Tom Wright, a biblical scholar, is Dean of Lichfield.

Jesus himself has predictably annoyed by-the-book Church of England bishops and other traditionalists, just as Paul did when he preached to Gentiles. Wilson, as they point out, is neither a licensed theologian nor a priest. Father Tissa Balasuriya, of Sri Lanka, is both, or rather was, until last January, when he was excommunicated by Rome, a move dismaying to many Catholics in Britain and around the world.

His offence was to write in his book *Mary and Human Liberation* that, as women were among the earliest followers of Jesus, he could not see why they should not be priests. He also criticised the doctrine of original sin, offensive to the other great religions of Asia, writing that 'to believe that whole generations of entire continents lived and died with a lesser chance of salvation is repugnant to the notion of a just and loving God' – words very like those St Paul wrote to the Galatians.

The C of E can't excommunicate Wilson, who has already left (though from his books he is plainly a follower of his version of Jesus) but the Dean of Lichfield, Tom Wright, has cobbled together some learned lectures in *What Saint Paul Really Said* to put Wilson in his amateur's place. Wright intends to defend the true faith, no doubt, although his patronising, pew-emptying tone and trendy talk of 'scenarios' and 'databases' go far to explain Wilson's spiritual restlessness. It seems Christianity in its present turmoil could do with another St Paul.