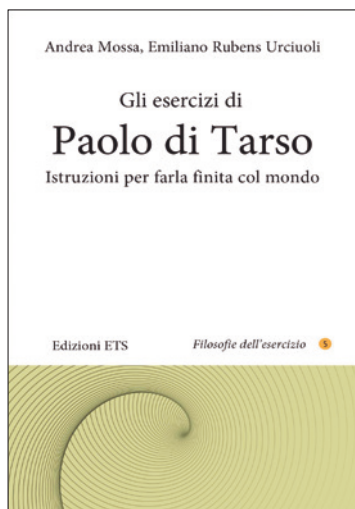


GLI ESERCIZI DI PAOLO DI TARSO



MOSSA, ANDREA & URCIUOLI,
EMILIANO RUBENS (2024). *Gli
esercizi di Paolo di Tarso. Istruzioni per farla
finita col mondo*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS. 116
pp., 12,00 € [ISBN 978-884676822-3]

GIULIO MARIOTTI

ISSR “R. Guardini” – Trento

mariottigiul2@gmail.com – <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9142-3801>

The Authors, Andrea Mossa and Emiliano Rubens Urciuoli, are, respectively, a philosopher specializing in political philosophy and a historian of religions with a particular focus on early Christianity. The volume *Gli esercizi di Paolo di Tarso. Istruzioni per farla finita col mondo* [trans. *The Exercises of Paul of Tarsus. Instructions for the End of the World*] is, as explicitly stated in the text, the result of a collaborative writing process, where each part was shared despite the Authors' initial division of sections as follows: Mossa (“Introduction”, “Chapter 2”, paragraphs 1-5 of “Chapter 3”), Urciuoli (“Chapter 1”, paragraphs 6-7 of “Chapter 3”, “Chapter 4”, and glossary).

The book is the fifth volume in the *Filosofie dell'esercizio* [trans. *Philosophies of Exercise*] series by Edizioni ETS. As such, it falls within a specific genre and adheres to a distinct editorial approach. According to the back cover, the series aims to offer readers “an unprecedented global and synoptic repertoire of methods of exercise and self-transformation techniques that humans have conceived and practiced since antiquity”. To date, six volumes have been published, each dedicated to thinkers such as Socrates, Patañjali, Evagrius, Epicurus, Freud, and, here, Paul of Tarsus.

The text is structured into four chapters, the last of which provides the conclusions. Following the introduction, the remaining chapters adopt titles that align with the established format of other volumes in the series (“Diagnosis”, “Curability”, “Therapy”, “Objections and Reception of Therapy”), ensuring consistency in how the thoughts of each examined figure are presented. Additionally, an appendix includes a “Technical Glossary”.

In the introduction, the Authors situate Paul’s history and experiences within a specific historical context, relying exclusively – unless otherwise explicitly stated – on the seven letters now considered authentic. They maintain a methodological caution regarding the use of the *Acts of the Apostles* as a source for reconstructing the human experience of the historical Paul, given that *Acts* dates to the 2nd century CE and does not serve as an independent source, but rather is “biased, apologetic, and largely legendary” (p. 8). This reflects a rigorous methodological precision, although the credibility of *Acts* in depicting the historical Paul is increasingly reassessed from multiple perspectives. Accordingly, the Authors state that they will use this work only to supplement the authentic letters and exclusively in cases where the information provided appears historically plausible.¹

The Apostle’s thought, as introduced here, is presented in all its complexity and “ambiguities” (pp. 18-19), avoiding any simplification or harmonization. The Authors propose a “mimetic approach”, one that refrains from forcing Paul’s ideas into any single framework, given the sometimes contradictory nature of his thought across different contexts.

In the first chapter, following the logic of the series, the diagnosis is presented. It introduces the pivotal event in Paul’s life that marked a turning point in his existence: the Damascus Road calling, described as “direct, unmediated, suprarational” (p. 21). The Authors begin by questioning why a Pharisee like Paul would persecute Christians specifically, leading to a broader inquiry into the scandal their preaching

1. In the text, explicit reference is made to Campbell, 2022, pp. 265-286.

provoked. It must have involved more than simply differing ideologies. The revelation on the Damascus Road shakes Paul profoundly, leading him to “radically reevaluate” his beliefs. From this point arises the Apostle’s urgency to preach the message of the Resurrected One beyond the “traditional boundaries of the Jewish people” (p. 25). Thus, the turning of the Gentiles, through the proclamation of Christ’s resurrection, to the God of Israel, likely appeared to signal the imminence of the end times. The “diagnosis,” therefore, would be the understanding that Jesus has risen from the dead, and while awaiting his imminent return, the Gentiles turn to the God of Israel. In this imminence, the movement of Jesus’ disciples takes on the nature of an apocalyptic movement, maintaining a constant tension with the present yet-to-be-lived.

Chapter 2, on curability, opens by acknowledging the value of the apocalyptic not as a means to cure an evil, but to prepare for God’s ultimate victory over evil. Within this context, Paul, unlike Jesus and John the Baptist, forges an untrodden path by preaching to the Gentiles amid the approaching end times. In this journey, which offers no “ready-made” solutions, the Apostle proposes baptism, particularly for the Gentiles, not as a return to God (*teshuvah*) as it is for Jews, but as an adoption that makes them “children of Abraham” (*Rom* 4:11). According to the Authors, the context of baptism is not merely that of a moral antidote to sin but rather of a solution to the cosmic struggle between forces of good and evil, distinguishing Paul as an apocalyptic Jew of the 1st century. Baptism thus “redirects the power of Death against the body of Sin, leaving the subject biologically modified by the *pneuma*, free to ‘live for God’” (p. 41). The baptized thus become the “living returned from the dead”, akin to “revenants” of a transformation that will culminate with the second *parousia*.

In this situation, Paul faces two problems to resolve. The first, a “political” problem, involves urging the Gentiles who join the movement to renounce idolatry, which would provoke hostility from non-converted Gentiles, as it meant failing to honor the gods appropriately. Moreover, while Jews were respected for the antiquity of their religion despite differences with Gentiles, this did not apply to the “Jewish sect” of Jesus’ followers. By worshipping a crucified carpenter as the Son of God and King and by not practicing circumcision as other Jews did, they disturbed the delicate social balance between Jews and non-Jews. Here, the Authors, drawing on Fredriksen’s thought, highlight how Jesus’ followers, and Paul, undermined the ethnicity-based norms governing ritual obligations and exemptions in the Roman world.²

2. Cf. Fredriksen, 2017, p. 91.

The second, “practical”, problem was the absence of a codified and shared “disciplinary protocol” within the groups of Jesus’ followers. We are still far from a *christianismos* defined in opposition to *ioudaismos*, as Justin would later describe in the *Dialogue with Trypho* (6, 1). Paul emerges as the pioneering figure within this uncertain context. With the endorsement of the Jerusalem community, he would take on the mission among the Gentiles.

Chapter 3, dedicated to “therapy”, begins by highlighting how Paul’s thought cannot be regarded as systematic theology; rather, it offers theological solutions to contingent issues. The Authors define this as a sort of “guidebook” (p. 49) to be prepared for the moment of the second *parousía*. They propose seven points on which this guidebook should be developed, rightly emphasizing that it is merely an exercise created *ad hoc*, as the formation of a Pauline corpus will come long after the Apostle’s death. In this exercise, the Authors have imagined a hypothetical recipient characterized as a “theological adult Gentile, somewhat inexperienced in Hebrew scriptures and even less inclined to theologize” (p. 50).

The first point revolves around behaving like Abraham, having faith even in the face of the absurd. The second addresses the aspect of persecution as a guarantee of being on the right path to following Christ. The third point concerns the suspension of ordinary evaluations of things and interpreting events through the hermeneutical lens of the cross – God constantly intervenes in human affairs, even if this remains incomprehensible to humans. The fourth point introduces the principle of inversion; for the Apostle, “strength is weakness, wisdom is folly, gain is loss” (p. 59). The fifth point provides a warning about sexuality, which cannot be absent from the perspective of a former Pharisee looking to expand the boundaries of purity (cf. 1 *Cor* 3:16-17; 2 *Cor* 6:16). In the sixth point, the Authors highlight how Paul encourages his listeners to remain in the world they inhabit while awaiting God’s imminent intrusion without altering their “external” condition. Finally, the seventh point addresses the issue of communal meals among Jesus’ followers from both Jewish and pagan backgrounds; in the eschatological era, ethnic identity loses its significance as a value, and what should matter is avoiding scandal rather than specifying what to eat or not eat. The chapter concludes by emphasizing that, from the Authors’ perspective, Paul is ultimately less concerned with debating, for instance, the divinity of Christ, than with preparing his communities for the second *parousía*.

Lastly, Chapter 4 deals with objections and receptions of the therapy. Due to the editorial characteristics of the series and the individual volume, the Authors argue that it will not be possible to present the reception of Pauline thought throughout history. The vastness and complexity of the material that must be considered

cannot be adequately presented within the available pages and format. According to the Authors, recognizing Paul as an apocalyptic Jew of the 1st century who awaited an imminent end of times, and his non-systematic thought aimed at addressing contingencies in anticipation of such an end, along with the historical reception of Paul and its theological and social implications, would be confused and misunderstood. Thus, from the 2nd century onward, the curse of the *Torah* and the de-Judaization of Paul occurred because, following the “failed” end of times, the practices established by the Apostle for the Gentiles, which did not require full observance of the *Torah*, were no longer simply understood as temporary in anticipation of the second *parousia*. Referencing the thought of Piero Stefani,³ the two Authors acknowledge that this “collateral effect (...) of the messianic curability of the Gentiles” (p. 93), due to the delay of the *parousia*, is what subsequently led to the emergence of Christian anti-Judaism.

Thus, we arrive at the conclusion of the text, where the Authors clearly assert that Paul is “neither the founder of Christianity nor the inventor of Christian universalism” (p. 97). His “therapy”, moreover, which is strongly anchored around the idea of an imminent end of times, has transformed in the centuries that followed into something that the Apostle could not have even imagined – that Israel has ceased to be regarded as the “true Israel” (Justin, *Dial.* 11.5), and the Gentiles have become “the architects of the new conditions of salvation for a unfortunate people that has renounced (its) Messiah” (p. 93). Following Chapter 4, there is a “Technical Glossary” intended to assist the non-specialist reader in framing the fundamental terms of Pauline thought.

Without delving into the specific format of the series, in which the thoughts of Authors from vastly different epochs and contexts are presented, it is first worth noting how Mossa and Urciuoli have provided, within a precise literary genre and limited space, a detailed and up-to-date reconstruction of the key points in the study of Paul, particularly regarding his role within Judaism. The bibliographic references and arguments demonstrate a consistent reliance on the most discussed and shared studies and perspectives currently present in academia. In particular, the Authors refer repeatedly to scholars such as Ed P. Sanders, Daniel Boyarin, Magnus Zetterholm, Paula Fredriksen, Gabriele Boccaccini, Matthew Novenson, and Matthew Thiessen, who have marked and continue to influence research on Paul and the rediscovery of his Jewish identity.

3. Cf. Stefani, 2004.

It is undoubtedly interesting how the Authors have adapted the requirements of the series format to express Paul's thought in terms of "diagnosis", "curability", "therapy", and "objections and receptions of therapy". These four hermeneutical keys are intended to reinterpret the figure of the Apostle. It is important to note that Paul's thought has not been constrained to these frameworks. This schematization has allowed for the emergence of the image of the Apostle as a 1st century apocalyptic Jew who, having embraced the shocking revelation of a crucified and risen Messiah, believed that the solution to the problem of evil had arrived in the world and that it would be definitive with the Messiah's return. In such a context, Paul would have established, with the approval of the Jerusalem community, a community of Jews and Gentiles who, in anticipation of an imminent end, would not need to be circumcised but could remain in their own condition to access the Israel of God. However, Paul's thought was so radically transformed that it fueled a de-Judaization of the Apostle and an aversion towards Judaism, for two reasons. First, due to an inaccurate Pauline perception of the end of times; second, because interpreters of Pauline thought, not perceiving the eschatological end, began to understand it in "antithesis" rather than "within" Judaism.

Thus, the volume serves as an excellent expression of the academic debate on Paul, free from ideological and confessional constraints, demonstrating a historical-scientific rigor in analyzing the thought and life of one of the most influential and simultaneously divisive figures in the history of Christianity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Campbell, Douglas A. (2022). Chronology. In Schellenberg & Wendt, 2022, pp. 265-286.
 Fredriksen, Paula (2017). *Paul. The Pagans' Apostle*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
 Schellenberg, Ryan S. & Wendt, Heidi (2022). *T&T Clark Handbook on the Historical Paul*.
 London *et al.*: T&T Clark.
 Stefani, Piero (2004). *Le origini dell'antigiudaismo. Storia di un'idea*. Roma & Bari: Laterza.