

Book review:

**James R. Harrison. (2019). *Paul and the Ancient Celebrity Circuit, The Cross and Moral Transformation*, WUNT 430. Mohr Siebeck. Xvii+449 pp.**

By Christoph Stenschke

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In this collection of essays, Australian ancient historian and biblical scholar, James R. Harrison, compares aspects of today's cult of celebrity, fuelled by various media, to the quest for glory in Roman antiquity. This was a quest characterised by the constant self-advertisement of the Roman nobility, who were so keen not only to equal the glory of their ancestors, but to surpass it. Against the backdrop of this well-attested quest for ancestral and personal glory, Harrison examines how the "shame of the cross overturns the deeply entrenched Graeco-Roman culture of esteem and, in a surprising case of social levelling, establishes humility as its crowning virtue for the great man and his dependents" (vi). This leads to the question of how this "cultural collision, still reverberating today, affected the civic ethics of Paul's converts, their communal ethos and paradigms of group identity, their pedagogical curriculum, and their understanding of honour and dishonour?" (vi). In addition to the introductory and concluding chapters, Harrison has added three new studies (chapters 2, 3, and 6) for this collection. Five previous studies have been updated to emphasise their contribution to an understanding of how the cross of Christ effected moral transformation in the face of the self-assertive values espoused by the luminaries of the ancient celebrity circuit (vi).

In *chapter one*, Harrison writes on "The Bold and the Beautiful: Fame and Celebrity in Antiquity and in the Modern World" (1–48). This includes research on celebrity in its modern and ancient contexts, the commendation of ancient elites and their families, the ancient celebrity circuit and the significance of processional culture and also delineates the aim and structure of the collection. In *chapter two*, Harrison compares Paul's Epistle to the Romans and Cicero's writings on the reconfiguration of Roman society (49–77). Cicero, here, is taken as evidence for Roman social attitudes in the Imperial age. Harrison then addresses aspects of the social ideology of Cicero, as well as Paul and the reconfiguration of Roman Society in Romans 12–16, adding a consideration of the social challenge posed by Paul's Gospel to the developments in Rome, stretching from Cicero's Republic to Augustus' emergence as *Pater Patriae*.

*Chapter 3* traces the paradoxes of Paul's Apostolic ministry (2 Cor 4:7–18) in its Augustan and early Jewish apocalyptic context (79–107). Harrison describes the carefully orchestrated interplay between "reluctance" and "influence" in shaping the self-perception and public perception of Augustus and then traces the apocalyptic interplay of death, life, and glory in 2 Corinthians 4:7–18. In this comparing and contrasting of the legacy of these two

first-century leaders, Paul presents himself as inadequate, while Augustus comes across as reluctant. Harrison offers some tentative suggestions as to why the “leadership” ideals of Augustus, modelled upon the paradigms of reluctance and the endangered shepherd-ruler, declined, whereas those of the apostle Paul, drawing upon Jewish apocalyptic and the risen power of the crucified Christ, gradually took hold in Western civilisation, even though at a political level nothing would change for a long time in terms of family dynasties and their elite clients ruling the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, whereas the impact of Augustus and his adoptive father is indelibly marked in memoriam in the calendrical system of the West, Paul’s communities of cruciform grace continue to challenge the self-serving and self-promoting paradigms of contemporary leadership by their paradoxical understanding of power in weakness in 2 Corinthians 4:7–18 and, consequently, have the capacity to bring new life where a “somnolent antiquarianism” resists the imperatives of change (107).

*Chapter four* addresses Paul and the athletic ideal in antiquity (109–134, a study of Paul’s running and boxing images in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, coronal awards, and Paul’s redefinition of athletic honours). In *chapter five*, Harrison studies Paul and the ancient *gymnasiarchs* to analyse two approaches of pastoral formation in antiquity (135–171). The treatment includes the contacts that Paul would have had with the ancient gymnasium as well as Paul’s interplay with the ancient ideals of civic leadership. Harrison describes the motivations of the gymnasiarchs, their pastoral attitude and their role as benefactors, as well as their ethics and the honours accorded to them, along with the exclusivist ethos of gymnasiarchal laws. Against this backdrop, Harrison compares Paul and the ethical ideals of the ancient gymnasium (methodological problems in comparing the so-called Delphic Canon with Paul, differences between Paul and the Delphic canon, common ground between Paul and the Delphic canon, case studies on the reciprocity system and on the Ephesian household codes). Harrison concludes:

Regarding the values of the gymnasiarchal inscriptions, Paul’s thought converges with the gymnasiarchs on many important issues of benefaction culture. But while Paul acknowledges the centrality of ancestral tradition, he exposes the futility of its boasting. His pastoral approach to those under his care is (not unexpectedly) less masculine in its tenor than the gymnasiarchs, preferring to explain his pastoral technique with maternal and paternal images. Benefaction, for Paul, paradoxically revolved around an impoverished and dishonoured benefactor as opposed to the icons of civic virtue lauded by the gymnasium. Significant echoes of Pauline ethics are found in the gymnasiarchal inscriptions, but these ethical commonplaces are sharply differentiated by the dynamic of the Spirit in the believer’s life. Paul agrees with the *gymnasiarchoi* as to the importance of returning honour to human beings and to God, but he dismisses the coronal awards of athletes as “fading” and postpones the believer’s crowning to the eschaton. The exclusivist ethos of the gymnasiarchal law at Verroia also stands in contrast to the inclusiveness of Paul’s house churches.

There were also areas of overlap and divergence between Paul and the maxims of the Delphic canon. Whereas the Delphic canon teaches self-sufficiency through individual self-control, Paul inculcates in his communities the sufficiency of Christ through interdependent members of His body ministering to each other. Paul’s understanding of grace differed from the Delphic canon in that it upended reciprocity rituals, divesting them of their hierarchical status, and pinpricking the expectation of commensurate return. Paul also challenges the “ruling” role traditionally attributed to the *paterfamilias* in the Delphic canon, presenting a cruciform alternative that would bring about harmony in the household in a radically different way to late Stoic and Neopythagorean thought.

A new pastoral dynamic, founded on the crucified and risen Christ, had emerged for the *epheboi* to consider as an alternate route of honour and self-control. The honouring of the

weak in the body of Christ supplanted the agonistic world of civic honour and the selflessness of the Servant-Benefactor was to inform all social relationships, whether in the polis or in the household. Another pathway of ethical transformation had begun, moving from Jerusalem to Rome, and beyond (171).

*Chapter six* is devoted to “Paul, the Delphic Canon and the Ephebic Ethical Curriculum” (173–216; Delphi and the philosophic tradition of the Seven Sages, the pedagogical context of the Delphic Canon, that is, honorific inscriptions, *paideia* and virtue and several case studies in the ethical curriculum of the Delphic Canon). Against this backdrop, Harrison examines Paul’s pedagogy of ethical transformation and the alleged “wisdom” of the Corinthian elites.

In *chapter seven*, Harrison addresses the imitation of the “Great Man” in antiquity and how Paul inverts this cultural icon (217–255; the scholarly debate on the motif of imitation in Paul’s letters, an astute survey of the literary, documentary, and visual evidence for the imitation of the “Great Man”, Paul’s inversion of contemporary models of exemplary virtue and his language of “imitation” and civic paradigms of virtue). Harrison identifies the dynamic that differentiated Paul’s understanding of imitation from that of his Graeco-Roman contemporaries:

First, Paul confronted his auditors with the choice of conformity to this world (Rom 12:2) or to the image of Christ (8:29). The status of Christ as “the image of the invisible God and the first-born of every creature” (Col 1:15) reduced the boastful luminaries of the Graeco-Roman world to insignificance. The choice between models, therefore, could not have been clearer. Second, the transformation of believers into Christ’s glorious likeness had already begun in the present age through the Spirit (2 Cor 3:17–18; Col 3:10–11) and was given sharp behavioural focus in daily life by the example of the Father and Son (Eph 4:32–5:2; cf. 5:1 ...). Third, the death and resurrection of Christ had ensured the conformity of believers to the model of the risen Christ in the age to come (Rom 6:5; 8:19–21; 1 Cor 15:49; Phil 3:21). Fourth, as noted, it was ultimately the cruciform nature of Jesus’ call to mimetic discipleship (Mark 8:34–38; cf. 1 Cor 1:18–25; 2 Cor 4:7–12; 13:4) and his example of humility and service (Mark 10:35–45; Luke 22:24–27; John 13:1–17; cf. Phil 2:5–8; Rom 15:7; 2 Cor 10:1; Col 3:13) that triumphed over the Graeco-Roman preoccupation with inherited Status, individual achievement, and self-advertisement. Paul, a meticulous imitator of Christ, understood well the cost and glory of this alternate social Order that was powerfully manifesting itself in his house churches (255).

*Chapter eight* addresses Paul and ancient civic ethics. The focus lies on Paul’s subtle redefinition of the canon of honour in the Graeco-Roman world (257–296). After introductory remarks on civic virtue in the Greek East, the author focuses on the issues of “honour” and “dishonour” in ancient civic ethics and on Paul and the canon of honour in the Greek East (Paul’s language of honour and its engagement with the Greco-Roman honour system and Paul’s language of “shame” against this backdrop). Harrison argues persuasively that “Paul’s denunciation of boasting and the moral failure of humanity should be viewed as much against this backdrop as the traditional Jewish polemics against Gentile immorality and idolatry” (295). For Paul, “the divine vindication of Christ as the ‘dishonoured’ and ‘impoverished’ Benefactor is the touchstone for Paul’s reconfiguration of honorific society in the Body of Christ and its relations with the outside world” (296). This means that

The believer’s experience of “honour” and “dishonour” is the inevitable outcome of the self-denying ministry modelled upon the crucified, risen, and reigning Christ. This Christocentric narrative of cruciform “shame” and vindicated “honour” would enable believers to continue to serve others selflessly and humbly within the house churches and the city at

large, ignoring the stigma of social dishonour and not being seduced by the trappings of honorific status (296).

*Chapter nine* considers the relationship between Paul's house churches and ancient cultic associations (297–329). Harrison offers a fine survey of modern scholarship on the local associations and examines the Corinthian house churches as charismatic communities. He discusses in detail the differences and similarities between Paul's house churches, the cultic associations and the issue of honorific rituals and social relationships and the competing paradigms of group identity at Corinth; that is, the paradigm of a wealthy and socially pretentious minority in the Corinthian churches and Paul's counter-programme: "Paul provided another paradigm of community: a charismatic community, founded on divine grace, which inverted all the trapping of social status (1Cor 12:21–26). The cross of Christ had overturned the community of the wise and powerful and had exalted the community of the weak and foolish in its place (1Cor 1,18ff; esp. 27–29). It was a community where Jew and Greek, slave and free, could live in concord and mutual service (1Cor 12:13)" (329).

The concluding chapter offers a short survey of celebrity culture, the "Great Man," and the Apostle Paul, a summary of the argument and ideas for further research (331–347). A bibliography and several indices round off this challenging volume.

Throughout, Harrison indicates that Paul's ethos of humility, based on the work and example of Christ crucified, is outstanding in a world which, at least in its upper classes, was very much preoccupied with mutual comparison, boasting and the claim to self-sufficiency. Harrison offers a persuasive reading of certain aspects of Paul's ethics against the backdrop of the ancient Roman world. He poses a challenge to all leaders, past and present, to follow the example of Christ and to display humility over against the lure of comparisons with others, boasting and self-sufficiency. What Harrison argues with regard to ancient society and its values also applies to the elites today, as well as to those aspiring to such status: "[I]his culture of ancestral promotion and self-aggrandisement among the civic elites and their clients in antiquity sat uneasily with Christ's teaching on humility, his establishment of an alternative 'servant' community of the marginalised, and his searing denunciation of the self-advertisement and self-serving power of the elites" (333).

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