

Malina, B J & Neyrey, J H — Portraits of Paul: An archaeology of ancient personality

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Reviewer: Prof G M M Pelser

As indicated by its subtitle, this book is in the first place an inquiry into how human personality was perceived in the Mediterranean world of New Testament times, the results of which are then used as background to paint a portrait of Paul by making use of the information available from his letters and from other early Christian documents like *Acts* and *The acts of Paul*.

After addressing the 'problem' of ancient personality in an introductory chapter, three successive chapters deal with what was said about personality in the ancient Mediterranean. For the retrieval of the relevant information use was made of the writings of rhetoricians of that era in which directives or exercises were given for public speaking. Two of these are focused on, namely the *encomium* (chapter 2), a set of formal instructions on how to praise a person, and the 'public defence speech' (chapter 3), one of the three known kinds of speeches discussed in ancient rhetorical literature. Apart from these, chapter 4 deals with a third source of information, namely a set of writings called *physiognōmonia*, which indicates how one can learn all about a person's character or nature from such a person's looks and place of origin. This is followed by a fifth chapter in which ancient Mediterranean persons are described in cultural perspective, and the final chapter in which the retrieved information, combined with information about Paul, is used to paint a portrait of Paul. Of the two appendices, the second is especially useful and informative. It comprises a comparative table of salient features of individualist Western cultures and collectivist Mediterranean cultures, highlighting in a nutshell the sharp differences between the two cultures regarding the way in which personality is perceived.

Due to the fact that it is a book with so much and such detailed information about many different aspects of personality in the ancient Mediterranean, it is impossible, within the limits of this review, to provide the reader with a summary that will do justice to even the most outstanding pieces of information. Nevertheless, what becomes clear from the book, and what the authors intend showing, is that there is a vast difference between the Western individualist and the Mediterranean collectivist notion of personality. According to the authors this fact has traditionally not been taken into consideration when ancient personality has been under discussion, since it has usually been done through the eyes of a Western individualist orientation. The study shows that as far as the ancient Mediterranean is concerned, apart from the fact that aspects like country or city of origin, ethnic and ancestral origin and birth, nurture and training, accomplishments, fortune, health and physical appearance all played a part in defining personality, personality in a culture like this is primarily to be described as embeddedness in many respects. This means that ancient Mediterraneans considered themselves as embedded in a range of in-groups with varying degrees of loyalty: in family, fictive family (teacher and disciple, faction, work group, patronage), village, polis, ethnic group, and the like. This means further that they had to see themselves as group-oriented persons who were, among others, expected: to think of themselves as dyadic group members and to relate to others stereotypically; to think 'socially' in group terms, and to

employ inherited stereotypes; to always represent their groups and the views of their groups; to experience little if any geographical and social mobility or status change over many generations; not to experience an autonomous self or act independently outside the inherited tradition and the community that upholds it; to be concerned with the primary goal of group integrity while maintaining the *status quo*; to keep in mind that group goals naturally precede individual goals; not to express what they personally think but to say what their conversation partner or audience needs or wants to hear from their in-group; not to have, as individual, a personal opinion on anything; to remember that saying the right thing to maintain group harmony is far more important than telling what seems to be the truth to the private self, and that it is shameful to expect to be told the truth if one is not an in-group member.

What is the case, then, as far as Paul is concerned? The verdict is that for all the 'independence' claimed for him by modern Western readers, he presents himself as utterly dependent on group expectations and the controlling hand of forces greater than him: ancestors, groups, God. He was not at all an individualist but a typically group-oriented person to whom 'independence' of any group authorization would have been a major liability. From the viewpoint of modern biography we know nothing of his character, personality, idiosyncrasies, likes and dislikes, or other vast dimensions of his life. But in terms of ancient Mediterranean concerns, we do not need to know any more, for, from what he tells us, we can fill in all that is necessary to know the man in his society (p 217).

It is not to be doubted that this is a very useful book and that the authors have proved their point in contending that there is a radical difference between the modern Western and the ancient Mediterranean perceptions of personality, and that texts from the New Testament world, and therefore also Paul, may not be read without fully taking this fact into account. Reading Paul equipped with this information must therefore inevitably result in painting a different portrait of the man, although so much of him 'personally' still remains unknown. But to use the word 'personally' is perhaps to fall again into the trap of westernizing the ancient Mediterranean Paul.

Apart from the great value of this book for determining the features of ancient personality, and apart from my appreciation for the contribution made by it, I cannot but wonder whether the situation in ancient Mediterranean everyday life was really a situation of such a lack of individualism and change, and of such stereotypical behaviour. Although it can be argued that the evidence is there in the literature for anybody to see, one nevertheless wonders how any changes could have taken place and how any progress could have been made in a society if such a society was so possessed with the need for stereotypical behaviour as well as the rejection or discouragement of individual initiative. And as for Paul, granting the fact that the change that he made was due to God's calling and mandate (p 206-207), and that he was indebted to certain circles which played an important part in shaping his theological insights, it should in my view also be granted that there is a fair amount of 'individual' insight and initiative to be detected in his thoughts and actions. It is true that, like anyone else, Paul and his contemporaries 'did not have that they did not receive' (1 Cor 4:7), but it is hard to believe that he was totally 'other-made' (p 217).

Hopefully this book will stimulate a new and fruitful discussion. It is an excellent piece of work, and highly recommended.