



**Rob A. Fringer**

***Paul's Corporate Christophany: An Evaluation of Paul's Christophanic References in Their Epistolary Contexts***

Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019. Pp. xviii + 232. Paper.  
\$30.00. ISBN 9781532645280.

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Perhaps the most well-known aspect of Paul's biography is his dramatic transformation from opponent of early Christ-groups to their foremost adherent as a result of what he calls an appearance (1 Cor 15:8) or a revelation (Gal 1:12, 16) of the risen Christ. Scholars have, understandably, put much effort into reconstructing the nature of such an event and its impact on his subsequent theology. Paul's letters themselves, however, provide us with little information with which to answer these questions. In this book, Rob A. Fringer seeks to reframe the conversation away from what he sees as speculative historical reconstructions and toward an analysis of the role that Paul's "Christophanic references" play in the letters themselves.

The introduction illustrates the state of scholarship with a select review of five significant contributions from the last fifty years (Seyoon Kim, James Dunn, Timothy Churchill, Beverly Gaventa, Paula Fredriksen), and establishes Fringer's own methodology. He describes it as "a 'text-centered, author-oriented intertextual' analysis" (17). The first two elements of this description are in reaction to the "behind the text" focus of historical reconstruction that dominates previous scholarship. Fringer recognizes the necessity of historical context for understanding the words of the text, but this aspect is not prominent in his exegesis. The "intertextual" element does not arise from the literature review but draws on Richard Hays's well-known approach to intertextuality and will come to play an important part in Fringer's argument.

Chapter 2, “Prolegomena,” establishes what will count as a “Christophanic reference” for the purposes of the study. Fringer offers two criteria that must both be fulfilled to qualify a passage as a Christophanic reference: (1) it must contain a “reference or allusion to a manifestation/revelation of/from Christ to Paul” (25), and (2) the same text must be “connected to Paul’s initial call/conversion” (25). Armed with these criteria, Fringer settles on Gal 1:11–17, 1 Cor 9:1–2 and 15:1–11, and Phil 3:4–14 as “confirmed Christophanic references”; he sensibly excludes 2 Cor 12:1–4, Rom 10:2–4, and a host of other passages that refer generally to grace, apostleship, or being “called”; 2 Cor 3:1–4:6 is tentatively included as an indirect reference. This selection dictates the structure of the rest of the book, which proceeds letter by letter to study Paul’s Christophanic references in Galatians, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, and, finally, the debated case of 2 Corinthians.

Paul’s fullest autobiographical statements about his Christophany are in Galatians, which is where Fringer starts. Prevailing scholarly opinion holds that Gal 1–2 consist in a defense of Paul’s gospel and apostleship. Within this context, Paul’s specific references to his Christophany serve to establish the superiority of his gospel through an appeal to divine revelation. Fringer argues, to the contrary, that the primary purpose of Gal 1–2 is to remind Paul’s audience that a new eschatological age has begun, and the Christophanic references serve as proof of this new eschatological age. Fringer further argues that Paul parallels his own reception of the gospel in 1:11–16 with the Galatians’ reception of the Spirit in 3:1–5 to show that they have both received a divine calling, which should not be forfeited for a merely human gospel. Paul’s narration of his own Christophany serves as a model of how the Galatians should respond to their own divine calling into the new eschatological age. In the course of his exegesis, Fringer finds multiple allusions and thematic links to Isa 40–66, which he uses to further specify Paul’s understanding of Christ and the Galatians. Christ is Isaiah’s servant figure “who atones for sin and ushers in a new eschatological reality” (81). Paul and the Galatians are “eschatological servants of the Servant who [are] called to carry out the mission of being a light to the nations and bringing glory to God” (82).

Chapter 4 considers the Christophanic references in 1 Cor 9:1–2 and 15:1–11. Again, Fringer argues against a consensus position that Paul references his Christophany primarily in order to defend his status as apostle. Indeed, Fringer argues that Paul does not seek to establish legitimate status and rights at all in 9:1–14. Rather, this section reproduces the misguided conception of the Corinthians, which Paul corrects with the true understanding of apostleship in 9:15–23. His Christophanic reference in this instance is a negative example that the Corinthians should not imitate. The appearance of Christ to Paul serves as a more positive model in 1 Cor 15:1–11. Here Fringer finds correspondences between the death and resurrection of Christ (15:3–4), the death-like status of Paul before his Christophany (inferred from Paul’s description of himself as an *ἐκτρωμα* [v. 8]), and the spiritual death believers must go through before experiencing new life in Christ (15:36).

Fringer discerns a similar threefold correspondence between Christ, Paul, and his audience in Phil 3:4–14, which forms the subject of chapter 5. Here Fringer reads Paul's list of gains that he now counts as loss in light of Phil 2:6–11 in which Christ surrenders his privileged status for the sake of obedience to God's mission. Paul himself makes a similar link in 3:10–11 and hopes for a similar exaltation: "I want to know Christ ... by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I can attain the resurrection from the dead." Paul further offers this as a model of imitation for the Philippians to follow (3:17), so Fringer concludes: "Paul's story becomes Christ's story even as Christ's story becomes Paul's. Additionally, Paul's story becomes the Philippians' story in part with an invitation to become the Philippian's story in full" (137). As in earlier chapters, this is further fleshed out with allusions to Isaiah's suffering servant.

Chapter 5 deals with the contested case of 2 Cor 3:1–4:6. The main difficulty with viewing this passage as a reference to Paul's Christophany is his use of the first-person plural throughout. Fringer correctly rejects the view that Paul uses the first-person plural to simply talk about himself. He must intend to include at least his coworkers and sometimes the Corinthians as a whole. This does not, however, invalidate the possibility of a Christophanic reference for Fringer. Rather, it very conveniently fits his overall argument that Paul extends aspects of his Christophany to his audiences to include them all in a shared calling. Paul's own experience (again read through a series of allusions to Isaiah and Exodus) serves as the paradigmatic example of call, conversion, and transformation for all believers.

A conclusion synthesizes the results of the study and leads to three "assertions" that constitute the overall argument of the book. First, Fringer highlights the importance of Isa 40–66 for Paul's understanding of his own Christophanic experience. This will likely be the hardest aspect of the book for many readers to swallow, especially those less enamored with Richard Hays's approach to intertextuality and allusion. Isaiah was certainly an important text for Paul, but it is doubtful whether particular words and themes from Isaiah should determine the interpretation of Paul's letters to the extent that Fringer argues for here. The second assertion is that Paul did not see his Christophany as entirely unique but regularly highlights analogues between his own experience and the call/conversion of his addressees: "Paul's experience shaped the way he viewed conversion and call as a whole" (183). This leads to the final assertion: Paul's references to his Christophany (and perhaps his own understanding of it) should ultimately be viewed as "corporate," that is, as a means of solidarity and unification with other believers. Hence the title of the book.

This is an original and bold thesis that deserves consideration. Paul's revelation of Christ is almost always understood as something that Paul uses to set himself apart from both his audience and his opponents. Fringer, however, astutely recognizes several aspects of this experience that Paul extends to all believers, most notably the divine source (whether through Christ or Spirit) and the divine calling that accompanies it. There are, of course, elements of Paul's experience as he narrates it that remain distinct. Fringer recognizes this, and thus the crucial question is to what extent Paul

emphasizes the similarities and distinctions between his experience and that of others. Fringer's tendency is to emphasize the similarities, which makes for an original argument and an edifying theological message. Future scholarship should engage Fringer's arguments and decide for themselves where the balance lies.