

**Review of Cavan W. Concannon, *Profaning Paul*.
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Why do biblical scholars and philosophers continue their preoccupation with protecting Paul and the Pauline archive when doing so prevents barrier-breaking advances in thought and may even prove hazardous to personal and collective health? Cavan W. Concannon's impressive monograph in the University of Chicago Press's *Class 200* series investigates this question, delving deep into Paul's doo-doo to argue that the best way to deal with Paul is to deal with Paul as waste.

But while Paul may be shit, Concannon's book certainly is not. In this affectively sensitive and thoroughly thought-provoking study, the author compellingly engages a range of resources, including critical feminist, queer, postcolonial, and race studies as well as new materialism and continental philosophy. By the conclusion, it is evident that there is fecundity in the rubbish pile and new ways of reading Paul by refusing Paul.

The monograph is divided into nine short chapters, broken into four sections by introspective interludes. The first two chapters introduce how and why we readers are in the ancient latrines with Paul. Concannon explains, "Paul's letters, his concepts, and his turns of phrase have supported anti-Semitism, the oppression of women, the pogroms of dictators, and the expansion of neoliberal capitalism," in addition to Christian support of slavery and many other atrocities (2). Should this shit show not be enough to excise Paul from scripture or cultural relevance? Reading with Vincent Wimbush and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Concannon focuses on the concurrent problems of canonization and secularization that ensconce Paul's authority. These also bolster the interpreter's authority, either by configuring Paul and his words as indistinguishable from god, or by treating him as a genius, "a central voice in the Western cultural canon" (9–10). The second chapter combines the work of garbologists (those who study the trash of modern cultures) such as Dominique Laporte and Brian Thill with historians and theologians like Achille Mbembe and Karen Bray to discuss "why it is worth sitting with the shit" (13). Here, Concannon details how "excrement and waste name a discourse that separates the civil from the barbarous, the clean from the unclean, the righteous from the unwashed masses" and is "tied to complex ancient and modern economies of production, consumption, and reuse" and even theological logics (26). Yet, Concannon also argues that waste is sometimes recycled, providing hope for new uses and innovation.

In his chapter "The Bible Doesn't Smell," Concannon considers the limits of historical biblical criticism for profaning Paul. He argues compellingly that biblical scholarship has become "the Bible's sanitation department, taking out the shit so that its texts could be kept fresh and clean" (34). Drawing on work by Katie Cannon, Stephen Moore, Yvonne Sherwood, and others, Concannon makes the astute point that problematic parts of the Bible were often repackaged as "historical," whereby they were rendered exempt from moral critique. From here, Concannon addresses two ways philosophers and theorists have approached Paul: either by redeeming

him or by splitting him into two. He analyzes three redemptive projects by Jacques Ellul, Alain Badiou, and Ward Blanton, showing where they fall short in addressing Pauline waste. Ellul's interest in an anarchist Paul requires that he remove Paul from his immediate imperial context. Badiou's view of Paul is shaped through his theory of the event, helpfully recapped by Concannon (58–59). Because Badiou theorizes the Resurrection as the event, or that potentially transformative moment of negotiation between the one and multitude, he theorizes a Pauline Christianity that is thought to transcend differences, such as gender, status, or ethnicity, making an “unredeemable remainder deposited in the cesspool left by Paul's transformation into a radical militant” (66). For Blanton, Concannon argues, the true, radical Paul was covered up by those who would seek to retell his story in service to the empire and anti-Judaism. “But,” Concannon asks, “does the Pauline archive really bear no responsibility [for the Platonism that leads to various forms of oppression]?” (72). If all of these “recycling projects” leave potentially harmful Pauline remains, would it not be better, Concannon asks, “to unleash Paulinists without origin, without saints, without limits?” (75). Do we need Paul to authorize liberative movements?

Some interpreters, such as filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini and biblical scholar Brian Blount, split Paul in two, separating out the recyclables from the waste. Here, the shit is recognized for what it is and the harm it has caused, but other parts of the Pauline letters are deemed useful, even salvific. Yet, Concannon pushes on in the next section: profaning Paul is what is necessary, defining “profane” with Agamben, as returning something to public use after it is no longer bound to the gods (95). Concannon argues that “profanation offers a way of surviving Paul's archive” where that survival is different from merely interpreting it (101). Indeed, Concannon sees profanation as what enslaved Black Africans have often done when interacting with Paul: “By constructing a Bible from their experience through such playful interpretation and reuse, enslaved Christians profaned the white Bible, arresting its old use as a tool in their own oppression and putting it to new use” (109). The “play” that Concannon refers to is exemplified by a 1774 petition to the government of Massachusetts in which enslaved Africans “use Paul to argue against Paul” that they cannot do their Christian duties (as husbands, wives, parents, etc.) on account of the violence of the slave system (also upheld in the household codes). Indeed, similar hermeneutical approaches have been employed by many Womanist and African American biblical scholars. Some of these feature throughout the book, such as Clarice Martin, Howard Thurman, Renita Weems, and Delores Williams. In his final chapters “Paul's Shit” and “Refusing Paul,” Concannon notes similar strategies employed by feminist and queer Pauline interpreters who critique Paul's claims to authority while developing new ideas that are not necessarily tied to Paul. Concannon then builds on such scholarship as he demonstrates his profaning approach to Philippians and 1 Corinthians 4 (passages where Paul actually talks about waste, shit, and digestion!).

The interludes, while short, loom large over the feel of the book: knowing how the author relates to the subject calls me to my own introspective reading processes, where I agree and disagree, what ideas I might recycle and what to discard. Beautifully poetic and intimate, these interludes encourage me to say where I, like the author, have been troubled by Paul's canonization, or had times when life has been shitty, and when I have felt like garbage. They also draw attention to the figure of the author and his authority within the book. There is a tension regarding how convincing Concannon's journey into shit can be, and for whom he embarks.

Concannon is, as he himself points out, “a cis hetero male who presents as white,” for whom biblical scholarship was made (51). He continues to wrestle with Paul even while critiquing himself for doing so. I wonder how much value there can be to Concannon’s declaration that Paul is shit and that the Pauline archive should be profaned by playing, deconstructing, trying to create something new or desirable. A certain amount of privilege is required to make such a statement; the idea itself seems to hail from secular universities that do not rely (outwardly) on denominational ties or funding. The author also continues to wrestle with white malestream biblical scholarship and philosophers, but not always in ways that profane; they still get a lot of attention in the book. Concannon describes how the book “refuses the respectable detachment of biblical studies, following instead the intimate, impassioned, and resistant voices of minoritized and marginalized scholars. ...I put the work of these readers of Paul alongside predominantly white, securely tenured, leftist political theorists and philosophers” (8).

How much does the process of profaning Paul recycle and repackage the work of interpreters who have been surviving Paul and his interpreters for centuries? It feels queasy when Concannon identifies himself and feminist biblical scholars with/as Senegalese garbage workers (133–34). The recycling and reuse of the lives of the people who are actual garbage workers for the purposes of applying a metaphor to biblical studies feels profane, even gross. Yet these tensions in the book are the challenges in the field more broadly: which stories and voices to elevate and which to elide. Concannon’s book is worth keeping, savoring, even sinking your teeth into. His highlighting of minoritized and marginalized scholarship is fresh air amidst the stale garbage that characterizes too much biblical scholarship. Concannon’s serious and playful process of profaning Paul offers hope of new life for those burned by Paul, especially when that profanation is rooted in a community of committed and experienced scholars and readers.



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