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## *Understanding Paul* Richard Lloyd Anderson

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## Book Reviews

RICHARD LLOYD ANDERSON. *Understanding Paul*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983. 448 pp. \$7.95.

Reviewed by Kent P. Jackson, assistant professor of Ancient Scripture, Brigham Young University.

With his publication of *Understanding Paul*, Richard L. Anderson has made available for the first time a major work that examines the life and writings of the apostle Paul from the perspective of both Paul's world and the doctrines of the restored gospel. Writing from the vantage point of a lifetime of commitment to the message Paul taught and almost three decades of studying and teaching about Paul, Anderson has achieved a marriage of gospel and secular learning that should be a paradigm for Latter-day Saint ancient scripture studies for many years.

Paul embodied many of the complexities of his generation. As a Jew of the Diaspora, he grew up in a world which encompassed the conservative traditions of his forebearers and the liberal cosmopolitanism of his neighbors. A practicing Pharisee trained as a scholar in that profession at the feet of one of its foremost rabbis, he held status in his Jewish faith and functioned closely with its hierarchy. He was a product of the Greek world in which he was born and raised. And he was a citizen of Rome as well—not only a product of that empire, with its ever-expanding world and world view, but actually enjoying the status of membership in its elite citizenry. Although he undoubtedly spoke the Aramaic of his Jewish brethren and read the Hebrew of their sacred texts, his acts, speeches, and writings are preserved forever in the language of the Greeks—the world language of his day—which Paul knew and used with flawless eloquence. Such complexities were the realities of Paul's life, and they formed the backdrop of his ministry. Without understanding them, it is difficult to understand fully Paul the man, his life, and his writings.

The foremost contribution of Anderson's *Understanding Paul* is its incorporation of these facets of Paul's world into the context of the gospel message the ancient Apostle taught. For Anderson it is the

message itself that is of prime importance. Historical, cultural, and linguistic insights, so lavishly provided in the book, serve as a tool to understanding the very focus of Paul's efforts: the message of the gospel.

*Understanding Paul* is divided into eight chapters and four appendices. Two of the chapters deal with introductory issues, the third discusses Paul's ministry as described in the book of Acts, and the remaining five chapters each deal with a collection of Paul's letters. In these final chapters, the letters are grouped into fairly standard divisions that reflect subject matter, date, and place of writing. The book as a whole is not a commentary on the New Testament text; it is, for the most part, an analysis of the issues discussed by Paul in his letters. In the chapters that deal with the epistles (following valuable introductory material), Anderson discusses the letters topically. He has chosen from each letter the most significant doctrinal issues (anywhere from one to nine), and he discusses each in depth—both within the context of Paul's other writings and within the context of the doctrines as restored by Joseph Smith. Readers seeking a verse-by-verse commentary will not find it in this book. But the issue-by-issue commentary is most valuable for understanding Paul and his larger message.

The appendices add to the reader's understanding of Paul and his world. Among the valuable material in the appendices is a lengthy chronological chart that outlines the events of Paul's career and proposes dates for them.

Along with the many strengths of *Understanding Paul*, nevertheless, two possible weaknesses come to mind. As mentioned above, the book is a topic-by-topic commentary rather than a commentary on the text. Thus, some readers may not find the book as useful as it would be otherwise in locating information on specific passages. However, the excellent scripture index at the end of the book refers readers to any scriptural passage discussed in the book. Serious readers who seek better understanding of Paul's theology and of his approach to teaching the gospel will not be disappointed with the format of the book. In fact, Anderson's topical approach to the letters is undoubtedly one of the great strengths of *Understanding Paul*, however less serviceable the book may appear to some who need a commentary on the text. In Anderson's work, the issues are discussed in an organized and detailed manner, not piecemeal, as they appear in Paul's writings. This gives the reader a greater sense of actually understanding Paul and the doctrines he taught.

A second criticism has more to do with editorial matters. The book would be much more readable if it had more subheadings. One chapter alone goes for thirty pages without a break in the text. This not only makes that chapter tedious to read, but it also makes the book less serviceable to those readers who otherwise could find desired topics more easily. There are other places in the book where a break in the text would have provided a welcome mental and visual pause.

Some may accuse Anderson of trying to present Paul as a modern-day Latter-day Saint in *Understanding Paul*. Such a criticism is factually unfounded, and it raises a philosophical issue that requires a brief comment in this review. Paul claimed in soberness that the gospel message which he taught was revealed to him, that he “neither received it of man, neither was [he] taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12). He went to great lengths to emphasize this fact. Similarly, Joseph Smith claimed to have received his doctrine from the same source. For Latter-day Saints who accept the testimonies of both inspired men, it is not only justifiable but indeed necessary to conclude that they understood and taught the gospel and its doctrines in the same way. Since the modern revelations (the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price) were given specifically to reveal untainted truth in a world of theological confusion, Latter-day Saint scholars need not hesitate to turn to those sources to understand the things that Paul taught. The gospel as understood in the LDS church provides the theological backdrop for Anderson’s work on Paul. He draws liberally from the speeches and writings of Joseph Smith and explains Paul to a Latter-day Saint readership through the perspective of the Latter-day Saint faith. This is a strength, not a weakness, of his work.

Finally, *Understanding Paul* responds often to the beliefs and interpretations of other Christian faiths regarding Paul’s message. Richard Lloyd Anderson possibly understands the Protestant and Catholic perspectives on the New Testament better than any other Latter-day Saint Bible scholar. His book makes frequent reference to those perspectives to show Latter-day Saints the strength of the LDS position. With an understanding of both Paul and the gospel, it is no surprise to find that the message of modern revelation is consistent with the gospel message of Paul. Were it not so, one would be compelled to conclude either Paul or Joseph Smith to be in error.