

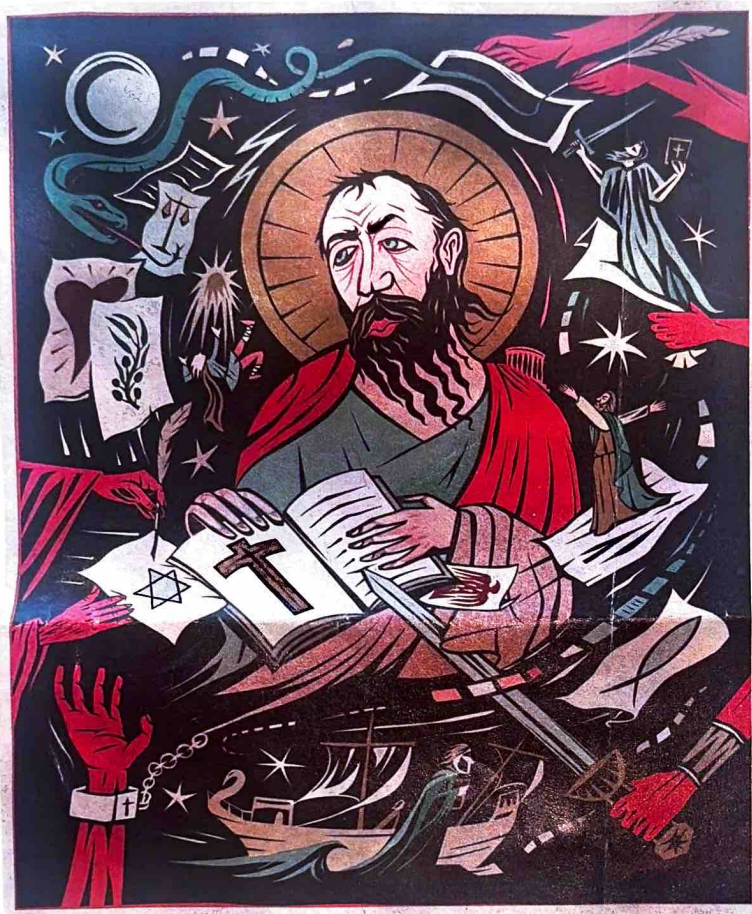


A CRITIC AT LARGE

WORLD ON A STRING

What prepared St. Paul to transform human history.

BY ADAM GOPNIK



If Western civilization were asked, in the terms of the old *Reader's Digest* column, to name the Most Unforgettable Character It Ever Met, it would surely answer, with a single, sighing voice: Paul. Not Sir Paul the Beatle, blessed as he is in advanced age, but St. Paul the Apostle, who, in the first century C.E., soon after the founding of the Jesus cult, brought to the Gentile world its salvationist doctrines shorn of the complex legalisms, dietary laws, and minutiae of devotion that marked the Judaism from which it sprang. In this way, Paul turned the heresy of a tiny sect of Messianic Jews into the dominant religious and cultural archi-

ture of the West for the next couple of thousand years.

Christianity as we know it—the all-are-welcome Church, with fairly undemanding required rituals, no daily prostrations, no rules for separating cheese blintzes from corned beef, just confession, Communion, and prayer—owes more to Paul than to anyone else, perhaps even more than to the narrowly parochial and Jerusalem-centered Jesus. It was Paul, almost single-handed, and against the suspicions of Jesus' original disciples, who journeyed and pleaded and made the faith portable. Quite a character! So much so that, in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, the direc-

tor Frank Capra was eager to make a movie of Paul's life starring Frank Sinatra. And though it sounds ridiculous when you say it, the casting actually makes sense. Whoever Paul was, he must have had charm, energy, and intensity, and been equally popular with the first-century equivalent of bobby-soxers and of made men. Raphael's great image of Paul preaching in Athens, arms outstretched, crowd rapt, could be the Chairman on tour in Greece.

Our strictly historical sources for Paul are thin. There are the Epistles, the letters Paul is believed to have written around the fifties C.E. to the small but burgeoning Christian assemblies of the Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean. Of the thirteen letters attributed to him, only seven are generally regarded as authentic; the others are thought to be later forgeries written to make Paul endorse more conservative positions in death than he did in life. (In the genuine epistles, he shows a remarkable equanimity about women playing an active role in the new Church; the forged ones are openly misogynistic.) Then, there are the Acts of the Apostles, the New Testament account of the early years of Christian evangelism, generally thought to have been written by the author who is given the name Luke and who either accompanied Paul on his travels or heard about them afterward. The Epistles tell us what Paul said, the Acts some of what he might have done.

A detailed story of Paul's travels and mission, Acts is also generally agreed among scholars to be largely, if not entirely, fictionalized, containing an improbable number of shipwrecks and prison breaks and snakebites and other twists typical of Greek storytelling from the period. It also smooths away the conflicts that the Epistles put on the page. The polemical point of Acts was basically to placate the imperial power by showing that Romans are good, Jews are bad, and Christians, though practicing a mutated form of Judaism, are more like Romans than they are like Jews.

Just as important, the Epistles and the Acts date to different sides of the great divide in Jewish history: the "Jewish War" of the latter half of the first century, a quixotic and doomed revolt against Roman domination, which ended in 70 C.E. with the complete

What did it take to turn a small messianic cult into a world-devouring faith?

destruction of the Second Temple and the banishment of the Jews from Jerusalem—the greatest catastrophe in Jewish history until the Holocaust. As Jews now tend to forget, the Temple-based religion was very little like the disputatious, text-bound, and intellectual religion of rabbinic Judaism; more frankly pagan in feeling, it essentially pivoted on regular rites of animal sacrifice conducted by a set priestly caste.

Then, overnight, there were no more sacrifices, and the priest class had nothing to do. In the wake of this disaster—one that the Jewish general turned Roman historian Josephus blamed on a fanatic lack of common sense and realism among the Jewish rebels, of a kind well caricatured in Monty Python's "Life of Brian"—the choices for saving the old faith were varied. The orthodox response was the development of rabbinic Judaism, which we now think of simply as Judaism. The study of the Torah, and the elaborate argumentative commentaries of the Mishnah and the Talmud, became the core of the religion, refereed by learned rabbis rather than supervisory priests. Another response was to drive forward the sectarian religion of the Jesus cult, and that's where the Pauline initiative took over.

If Paul's life can be reduced, from these polemical sources, to a set of more or less undisputed facts, it would be this: he was born, as Saul, in Tarsus, in what's now southern Turkey, sometime around the year zero, and came of age as a Greek-speaking Jew in the Diaspora. He became aware of the Jesus cult very shortly after its emergence, in the thirties C.E., and at first, by his own account, he "persecuted" the new faith—though, given how small the cult still must have been and how few public powers were available to Jews to enforce their prejudices, this was more likely persecution by argument than by torture. Then, sometime in the same decade, he had the most famous conversion experience in history, falling off his horse while trotting toward Damascus and seeing a celestial vision of the risen Jesus.

The epiphany took. For the next thirty or so years, Paul ceaselessly rode out on Christian missions, founding churches and corresponding with and correcting the movement's scattered small ones. (These churches tended to

be little more than living-room gatherings of at most sixty or so people, usually from the same household, with a land-owning family, its servants, and enslaved people together.) He had decisive meetings in Jerusalem with the man he called Cephas and whom we call Peter—the two names, Aramaic and Greek, respectively, just meaning "rock." He also met a man named James, who is presented as Jesus' brother. After mutual suspicion, the two arrived at a reluctant truce in which Paul was free to bring non-Jews into the Jesus movement, emancipating them from Jewish ritual, while the original Jerusalem circle continued to keep kosher, circumcise, and all the rest. Acts has Paul then being arrested and, because he was a Roman citizen, transported to Rome for a trial, which is where the story abruptly ends. Later legend has him executed by the very Romans he worked so hard to placate; other accounts seem to locate his end in Spain.

The most remarkable thing that emerges from these texts is what you might call Paul's emotional availability. He instructs, cajoles, gives shrewd advice—"be all things to all people" is his positive counsel on how to build coalitions—and sometimes engages in what certainly sounds like the hypocynical placation of opposing poles: cagily paying off that rival Jerusalem sect, warning against heretical influences, begging his far-off correspondents to avoid "splitting," praising competitive apostles, and taking exasperated digs at obscure obstacles to his work, oddly personal in tone for one so inspired by the Lord. "Alexander the coppersmith," he sighs at one point, "did me great harm." Then Alexander and his copper disappear from the record.

Paul agonizes, too. In his epistle to the Christian community in Rome, his insistence on grace collides with an undiminished loyalty to his own people (he can't accept that God has abandoned Israel), and the passage feels pained and real. "Some of the branches have been broken off," Paul writes to the Greek Christians, referring to Jews who reject Jesus and stand outside God's grace, "and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the

olive root. Do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches! . . . You do not support the root, but the root supports you. . . . Do not be arrogant, but tremble."

Paul's tone in the Epistles, to use a comparison that will scandalize followers of either half of the analogy, is strikingly like Leon Trotsky's in his autobiography. Trotsky (né Bronstein) was also a Jew who had both stopped being one and, necessarily, remained one, took a new name to lead an organization made up of Gentiles, and combined a pragmatic appetite for alliances with a hard ideological line. Both Trotsky and Paul get absorbed in quarrelsome dialectics and in point-scoring built around minute differences. Trotsky's arguments about revolution in one nation versus a revolution of the international proletariat, like the fine argumentative tracery of Paul's Jewish Christians versus Greek ones, seemed vital to the movement at the time but weirdly trivial and abstract to those outside it.

In the Epistle to the Galatians, Paul strains to show that the *Gentile mission* and the *Jerusalem mission*, though carried out by mutually mistrustful parties, belong to a single divine design. His mode of argumentation resembles nothing so much as Marxist dialectics, sinuously arguing from opposites and forcing a desired conclusion upon unobliging texts. He rereads God's promise to Abraham as if it had always pre-saged the later turn to "all nations," boldly reinterpreting the Jewish patriarch's "seed." Although everyone had taken it to mean Israel, Paul writes instead, "The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed.'" On that basis, he arrives at the bracing conclusion: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, and there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." The power of an orator who can, in this way, fuse feeling and doctrine is immense. (After hearing Trotsky speak in the nineteen-tens, my great-grandfather's brothers were converted from Orthodox Judaism to a Jewish-inflected Bolshevism.) Trotsky himself

had seen that the pragmatist follower who lacks true belief usually ends up on the other side; a passionate believer who lacks pragmatic planning skills usually ends up dead. In Paul's time, Josephus was a perfect instance of the first kind, a brilliant military leader who, when faced with the fanaticism of his cohorts, chose to shift his allegiance to Rome. Foremost among the examples of the second kind was the rabbi Jesus.

Wherever he appears, Paul is not a saint in his cell but a messenger at work—a man of close shaves, sudden escapes, and high-stakes debates. His tales and truths have, for all their apocalyptic mysticism, a decidedly practical charge that makes them exceptional in the New Testament or almost any religious literature. It *would* be a good movie! You can almost see the toughened, sinewy Sinatra of the fifties as Paul, with Sammy Davis, Jr., as the suspicious James and Dean Martin as a slightly befuddled Peter.

There are, however, many lacunae in Paul's writing and life that have puzzled readers. Why, across the tens of thousands of words of his epistles, does he never tell the story of the work and life of Jesus of Nazareth? There's essentially no Mary, no Joseph, no Nativity (much less a virgin birth), no miracles, no mission, no overturned tables at the Temple, no Galilean ministry rendered through narrative. This silence has led a handful of scholars to insist that Paul knew no earthly Jesus at all. But it's possible that Jesus was simply more important to Paul as a risen God than as an admirable man.

Just as we are lucky to have Mormonism as a near-at-hand experiment in how improbable religions rise and grow, we have the cult of the Brooklyn Lubavitcher Rebbe as a very near-at-hand reminder of how Jewish messianic cults come to life. And one of the lessons is that, although the Rebbe's personal history is widely known, it isn't part of his followers' messianic insistence. Ask an evangelical Lubavitcher whether he knows that the Rebbe studied for two years in Paris at the highly secular Sorbonne, and you'll often draw a blank look. Similarly, Malcolm X must have had some awareness of the actual life of Elijah Poole, but, when he was

delivering the words of the Messenger, he didn't mention any of it, certainly not that he came from Georgia or had worked in Detroit factories or had been to prison. The Messenger and Elijah Poole were very different figures.

Another puzzle relates to Paul's role, despite his Jewish training and identity, in early Christianity's open hatred of Jews. The older picture of Paul as the begetter of Christian antisemitism became, for obvious reasons, intolerable to many believing scholars after the Holocaust, and a counter-reading took shape that tried to return him to a sturdier Jewish setting. On this account, the Roman Paul gives way to a more strictly Jewish Paul; his outreach to Gentiles was meant to be expansive without being exclusionary, and the Jesus movement, even as it grew, still rested on the Torah.

The impulse is intelligible: to reassure post-Holocaust Christians that their faith does not, in fact, depend on the rejection of Jews that later Christian texts so plainly stage. You see the problem in the second-century Epistle of Barnabas, a post-Pauline codicil that treats circum-

cision not even as an obsolete rite but as a sort of mark of Cain. The old covenant is rewritten as a curse, with Jewish suffering cast as deserved punishment.

In more recent years, though, there has been a countermovement to restore Paul to a more credible Hellenistic context. Suddenly, we now have not the Roman Paul whom Acts depicts, nor the Jewish Paul, immersed in the prophetic traditions, whom his recent apologists conjure, but the Hellenistic Paul—Paul being a man who, after all, wrote in Greek and drew his imagery and instances from Greek myth and literature. The stakes of these disputes are high because of what they say about his inheritance. If Paul's creed is essentially Roman, then Christianity looks, from the outset, like a religion trained to live with empire, its compass always set toward placating power. If significantly Greek, then the question becomes how philosophical—and, more specifically, how Platonic—the religion is at its core, with doctrines that can seem mystical and otherworldly. If foundationally Jewish, or even anti-Jewish,



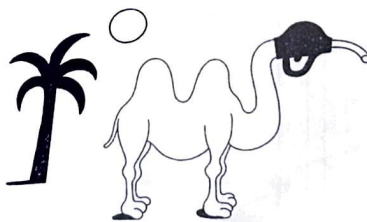
then the question is: how much of the old faith remains in the bloodstream, and what did Paul think he was doing to it?

This new, revisionist view is well represented in a recent scholarly collection, "Paul Within Paganism: Restoring the Mediterranean Context to the Apostle" (Fortress), edited by Alexander Chantzianoniou, Paula Fredriksen, and Stephen L. Young. The Paul of these pages, sketched by sixteen scholars, is close to his contemporary Philo of Alexandria. Like Philo, he joins the Platonism current in his day, with its layered cosmos and transcendent God, to a boldly reworked reading of Biblical prophecy, encountered in Greek translation rather than in Hebrew. Robyn Faith Walsh offers a beautiful poetic analysis of Paul's otherwise odd celestial obsessions, making the case that "Paul, like other Middle Platonists, saw the moon as a clearinghouse for souls awaiting a cosmic judgment." He belongs to a liminal space where occult Jewish faith documents and the poetic universe of Plutarch and Platonists co-exist. Trying to appease two audiences at once, Jewish and Greek, he instinctively combined their preoccupations.

In an even more startling essay, with the unforgettable title "Paul Among Pagan Penises," Ryan D. Collman argues that Paul's fixation on the politics of circumcision has been distorted by a simple mistranslation. A Greek term that means "foreskinned" has routinely been rendered as "uncircumcised." Paul, Collman stresses, wasn't saying that the Gentiles lack something the Jews have. He was talking about two different kinds of possession: Gentiles have foreskins; Jews have the ritual that removes them. More startling still, Collman demonstrates that, since the glans of the uncircumcised penis is visible only when aroused, Greeks assumed Jewish penises to be in a state of permanent arousal, thus producing a standing Hellenistic joke that only a "penis from Jerusalem" could satisfy a lustful woman. The politics of penises in this period gave enticing credit to Jews as erotic masters—an idea that sat well with the larger allure of Jewish exoticism to Christian converts. Rather like Indian gurus in nineteen-sixties hippie culture, the Jews were assumed to be repositories of every kind of mystical and human elevation.

Indeed, Walsh is sympathetic to an account of Pauline Christianity's allure that emphasizes its "exemptive" ostentation: the peasant simplicity and extreme antiquity of the Jewish-Christian faith was perfectly designed to appeal to alienated Roman urbanites who, like those hippie guru followers, wanted a new faith that was old, exotic, and of rustic origins, with incense burning day and night.

This revisionist view of Paul has reached a climax with Nina E. Livesey's recent book, "The Letters of Paul in Their Roman Literary Context" (Cambridge). Despite its dry title, the book argues, astonishingly, that Paul's epistles, indeed "Paul" himself, are inventions of the second century—that they actually were written largely by the crucial yet easily overlooked figure of the heretical editor Marcion and then backdated. Livesey, a professor emerita at the University of Oklahoma, is recognized as a significant Pauline scholar, and her book is closely argued, formidably annotated, and beautifully provocative. In her view, no first-century evidence exists for Paul, just as little exists for Jesus. More important, Paul's preoccupations with the politics of circumcision, and with Jewish ritual generally, seem to fit badly within a first-century, pre-Jewish War context. Back then, with the Temple still intact, those things were not controversial. The preoccupations make far better sense in a second-century context,



when a wave of anti-Jewish suspicion filled the Empire, particularly after the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132-35 C.E., the last great Jewish uprising against Rome, which ended in catastrophic defeat, mass death, and the refounding of Jerusalem as a pagan city. No one cared about condemning circumcision in 50 C.E.; everyone did a century later.

Letters were, in any case, a genre more than an epistolary act: most collections of antique letters, Livesey points out,

were unmailed and literary, written to enlarge a theme, not persuade a recipient. The proliferation of letters in the New Testament is also typical of second-century literary activity; letters written as rhetorical models, using the epistolary form as an intimate vehicle for argument, are everywhere in the later period. So Livesey thinks that Paul's letters make much better sense as a literary performance, too, if keyed to second-century Greek concerns and practices. This dramatic redating also contextualizes those odd interpolations—the Jew-hating sentences make more sense if written after the Bar Kokhba revolt—and, indeed, the broader question of how, exactly, there could have been so many practicing churches for Paul to correspond and commune with so soon after the establishment of the Jesus cult.

Livesey's thesis is so tightly and rationally argued that it can't be readily dismissed, and, even if it's wrong, it could be one of those theses which point the way to a larger rightness. Meanwhile, Livesey's arguments have been met with respectful—and, to this amateur reader, persuasive—rebuttals by several fellow-scholars, most formidably by Fredriksen and Walsh. Paul's letters, they note, read like *letters*, not literary performances, filled with local detail, tempest-in-a-teapot controversies, and people, like that coppersmith, who read only as living annoyances, not neat symbolic figures. They are also filled with apocalyptic premonitions that make sense only in a first-century context, when Jesus was credibly thought by his followers to soon be on his way back home, ready to take believers up to Heaven, or the moon, with him. By the second century, even devout Christians had to walk back this belief. Why, Fredriksen has asked, would writers of the mid-second century, composing pseudonymous letters in the voice of a first-century figure, include statements predicting Christ's imminent return?

Both Fredriksen and Walsh are convinced that, however Hellenized Paul might seem, he was entirely apocalyptic and millenarian in his thought and fully expected the world to burn within his lifetime. Is it inconceivable, though, that even a second-century invented Paul might have persisted in these premonitions? Those who raise millennial

expectations often adjust to their disappointment without great difficulty. No one was more confident than William Miller, whose preaching gave rise to Seventh-day Adventism, about the timing of the world's end and Christ's return: October 22, 1844, to be exact. But when it didn't happen he responded, in a beautiful instance of direct American speech worthy of General Ulysses S. Grant, "I confess my error and acknowledge my disappointment." In the same spirit, the early Christians seem to have quickly adjusted their own apocalyptic beliefs, easily recasting Jesus' return from "soon" to "someday." Paul's belief in the approaching apocalypse was perhaps a mixture of self-persuaded propaganda, a desire to impress, a readiness to retreat if necessary, and a shrugging, side-eyed nerve that says, "Well, what's the worst that can happen if I'm wrong? And, if my words helped scare people straight, what's the harm?" A second-century Paul might well be imagined as apocalyptic in this more rhetorical manner, too.

All days of fulfillment in religious history are, in any case, Great Disappointments, since the thing expected—Nirvana, the Apocalypse, the New Jerusalem—never does happen. Sooner or later, we trust the disappointment more than the dream. The original "Jewish" Church, which flares out like a glorious firework in the last, apocalyptic book of the Bible, Revelation, faded away in time, and Paul's universal Church grew and eventually triumphed.

What is ultimately at stake in the new literature is the question of Paul's commitment to universalism and, through him, the universalism of his faith. We love Paul for his celebration of love, for his insistence, in a key that seems to echo Jesus, that "faith can move mountains," and for his remarkable amendment of that claim: "If I have a faith that can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing." Yet his single-minded zeal is inseparable from his intolerance. As one revisionist scholar argues, this very insistence on doctrinal and moral boundaries became one of Christianity's most serviceable features once it encountered imperial power. A religion that defined itself sharply could be mobilized by the state, because,

from Paul onward, its leading voices showed a readiness to regulate and to enforce. Paul, in other words, hands down both the ethic of love and the habit of boundary-drawing, and leaves it to us to harmonize them.

Paul's account of love is complex, but on the aspects that matter it is clear. Love does not boast, it does not demean the weak, it is slow to anger, and it extends compassion to strangers. Contemporary Christians who give other Christians a pass on any of these do not seem to be very good correspondents of the Apostle. Paul's idea of agape is philosophically pointed; it carries the weight of duty and self-denial as much as of warmth and affection. But the originality is there. It is hard to think of an earlier Jewish, Greek, or Roman thinker giving pride of place to "love" of any kind. Even in Paul, though, the spiritual is balanced by the material. At the very end of Acts, when one might expect apotheosis, we are told that Paul lived in Rome "at his own expense."

Where the consensus of disinterested scholars on matters Pauline leads is to the usual place: the texts, like all sacred texts, are a mishmash of literary tropes, polemical invention, retrospective editing, and emotive appeal. They are conflicted, as we are. Jewish believers have had to come to terms with the inarguable truth that the story of the Hebrew enslavement, flight, and deliverance from Egypt is almost entirely mythical. The Hebrew people were not held in bondage in Egypt, and, in any case, there was no promised land to go to, since it was already under Egyptian control. Yet the meaning of the ritual is undiminished for its participants. Passover is not about a historical event but about a metaphoric explication of an ideal. If its objects are Hebrew enslavement and escape, its subject is hope. It does not reduce the ritual or pietistic content to know that it is fiction. In fact, the allegory travels more easily once it is freed from literalism. The same applies to Paul's case. "Fictional" needn't mean either fatuous or false. Jesus, who speaks in parables, not in dicta or dogmas, provides us with a primary instance of the power of the non-literal tale. We do not ask where the prodigal son's father really lived, or whether the man who built his house

on sand had a deed, or who could certify that the foolish virgins were virgins.

An oddity of modern life is that, just as humanists have made us newly alert to the irreducible power of stories, people of faith, who already possess the advantage of strong stories, reach for spurious "science" to underwrite them. Hence the appeals to a "fine-tuned universe," as if divine order were proved by the fact that the cosmos had to meet an exquisitely narrow set of conditions to yield conscious human beings. In truth, this is the same argument, beloved of parents, that the whole point of the universe was to produce one particular child. Consider the chain of contingencies that had to align, and the child's existence can feel like a miracle. In a sense, it is. Yet the pattern is blessed only in retrospect. We were always going to find ourselves in a universe compatible with our existence, because there is no other place in which we could be aware that we existed. And, if we are not cold or conscienceless, the universe that contains us cannot be wholly cold or conscienceless, either. It includes warmth because it includes us. Our values are human-made, but that does not make them unreal.

Was Paul's effect on history, incalculably large, good or bad on the whole? Edward Gibbon argued that Paul carried a "Jewish" intolerance into a pagan world that, for all its cruelties, was broadly pluralistic in matters of worship. Yet Paul also offered a universalism so urgently moving that it remains powerful today. That may be as close as judgment gets for a figure of his scale. We turn to philosophers and essayists, from Socrates to Richard Rorty, for inquiry and self-doubt. We turn to apostles and prophets, from Paul to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for the broader conviction that faith really can move mountains, and then for the still bolder thought that even moving mountains is not enough if love is absent. "All or Nothing at All," Sinatra's greatest epistle, revised across his life as the purposes of his music changed, might have served as a theme for that Capra bio-pic. It is bad advice for a lover. But it is good advice for a believer, since such intensity of commitment is, in the old-fashioned sense, awesome. St. Paul, whenever exactly he lived or whatever precisely he said, was nothing if not all in. ♦