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Rembrandt famously depicts Paul's incarceration. Even though the apostle is impoverished and under house arrest due to his preaching, his ministry is undeterred.

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606-1669), PAUL IN PRISON (1627). Oil on panel. 72.8 x 60.3 cm. Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Germany. Photo Credit: © Scala/Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Without Hindrance

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

The New Testament scholar Raymond Brown observes, “Next to Jesus Paul has been the most influential figure in the history of Christianity.”¹ Most scholars believe Paul was raised and educated in Tarsus in south-central Asia Minor. He wrote good Greek, had basic Hellenistic rhetorical skills, quoted from the Scriptures in Greek, and knew deuterocanonical books composed or preserved in Greek.² Due to the tremendous influence of the letters Paul wrote to early churches, Brown concludes, “Whether or not they know Paul’s words well, through what they have been taught about doctrine and piety, all Christians have become Paul’s children in the faith.”³

We read in Acts 21:15-28:31 how Paul suffered arrest in Jerusalem, imprisonment in Caesarea, and a hazardous sea journey to Rome as a prisoner. Rembrandt, the Dutch Baroque master who painted *Paul in Prison* at the young age of twenty-one, depicted the apostle (according to the iconographic tradition) with a long beard, bald head, pen in hand, and sword. Paul has paused a moment and is lost in thought as his left hand holds a pen and book. The light streams through the bars of the window into an otherwise gloomy cell, casting a warm glow on the wall behind the bed. The light creates a diagonal leading down to letters or folios strapped tightly in a leather cover, a sword, and an open book at the foot of the bed. These visual elements tell Paul’s story. The pen and folios remind us that several of Paul’s letters were written while he was a prisoner. The sword indicates the tradition that the apostle was beheaded by Roman soldiers during the reign of Nero. In addition to being the instrument of his martyrdom, the sword may be a reference to Paul’s previous life as a persecutor of Christians. Also, in a letter Paul calls God’s word “the sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17).

The book of Acts concludes with this description of the apostle incarcerated in Rome: “He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30-31). Even though Paul is a prisoner, yet he is free.

NOTES

1 Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 422.

2 Ibid., 435-36.

3 Ibid., 422.