A Review of:  

Author  
Quarles is Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has authored and co-authored an arm-full of books along with a number of articles and essays on various topics. With a few exceptions, Quarles has annually presented one or more papers at ETS conferences since 1995 as well as occasional, topical lectures at other scholarly venues. But Quarles’s interests are not solely academic; the pastoral is equally present. He has written for and contributed to teaching materials produced by the Baptist Sunday School Board, LifeWay Bible studies and other publishers geared toward the education of the church.

Overview  
Quarles’s book seems to bridge his academic and pastoral interests. The book, based on scholarly research, aims to present Paul’s life and letters in such away that readers might be inspired to carry out their ministry and vocation with the same commitment, fervor, and sacrifice as found in Paul (cf. ix). Over the course of nine uneven chapters, Quarles walks readers through the whole of Paul’s life and ministry. To be sure, the specific details concerning Paul’s birth and final days are ultimately shrouded in mystery and conjecture, but Quarles is cognizant of this fact and, in the main, proceeds accordingly. Thus, he examines the various traditions associated with those parts of Paul’s life and weighs their viability. The chapters in between these bookends are arranged quasi-chronologically, using the narrative of Acts—specifically the three so-called missionary journeys—as the source and guide for the arrangement. This accounts for the unevenness of the chapters, for when the narrative in Acts is lengthy or brief Quarles’s discussion responds in kind. Along the way, Quarles pauses to consider and explain key historical, sociological, and theological matters, especially as they relate to Paul’s thought and ministry strategy. Many of these pauses are refreshing and merit the accolades on the back of the book.

Strengths  
In terms of strengths, the book has a range. First, the style of presentation is generally engaging, almost playful, and this enables readers to travel through the narrative at a quick pace while at the same time appreciating its key features. Second, the illustrations and maps throughout the book assist readers in conceptualizing the nature and sometimes grandeur of the places Paul traveled and proclaimed the gospel. Third, Quarles’s decision to situate the narrative within the framework of Acts is useful for those seeking to contextualize the occasions and historical circumstances from which Paul’s letters arose. While not all NT scholars will accept this approach (i.e. using Acts as a source for Paul’s life and ministry) or agree with some of the conclusions Quarles makes about certain letters (e.g. provenance of the Prison Letters), the arguments here are worth patient consideration. Finally, while not all will accept his decisions on this matter, let alone the proposed timing and provenance for certain letters (e.g. Prison Letters, Pastoral Letters), it was a relief (though not a surprise) to see Pauline authorship attributed to all thirteen letters. Quarles provides a reasonable—albeit brief—summary for how to make such a case using the known historical details in Acts.
Weaknesses

However, even with such strengths the book is not without weakness, and these too have a range. First, there are occasional and unnecessary repetitions of information, found not only in the body of the text (e.g. 4/6, 22, 69/72, 88/90, 95/99, 110/115, 148/151, 152/153, 160-61/175-76, 162/164, 195/196, 196/200) but also the image captions. In the latter, the descriptions mirror what can be found in the text (e.g. 45, 46, 186, 228, 229, 252, 266). Second, the use “Christian” and “Christianity” throughout, while potentially useful for and familiar to non-specialist readers, are not only anachronistic but also unhelpful. This is especially the case when Quarles uses the term “Christianity” as though it were a recognized religion, distinct from Judaism, within the context of Paul’s life and ministry—or even that Paul himself became a Christian (see 1, 29, 60, 74, 168). Moreover, Quarles occasionally says things that make it appear as though Judaism and Christianity coexisted and/or were at odds with each other (e.g. 1-2, 16, 19, 30-32, 71, 76, 78, 137, 168, 216, 246-47; cf. 56, 224). NT scholars have demonstrated that such was not the case and would not be until more than a century later (see e.g. Dunn [1992, 2006]).

Third, the book contains a handful of unnecessary tangential discussions, which are not only quite lengthy (e.g. 152-56, 158-59) but also distracting to the flow of the argument. Fourth, Quarles’s frequent appeals to rabbinic traditions or regulations in order to substantiate a claim regarding Paul’s teachings or practices are ultimately anachronistic. Fifth, the book is riddled with overstatement and dramatic claims, presumably offered for effect (e.g. 4, 8, 37, 74, 77, 93-95, 129, 132, 136-37, 141, 154, 163, 168, 201, 211, 222, 226, 232, 235). Related to this problem is the fact that Quarles’s penchant for the dramatic often comes at the expense of textual or historical accuracy. I cannot recall how many times I found myself saying, “But the text does not say that” or “You’re asserting claims that are not in line with the text.” In fact, there are occasions when the biblical account says the exact opposite of what Quarles asserts (e.g. 43, 48, 52, 71, 88, 101, 145).

Finally, and this is most glaring weakness, the amount of speculation that pervades the book is astounding, not to mention disheartening. And with this there is a related concern: there appears to be either an unrecognized or an unjustified double standard at play in the book. In in two places (172, 256), Quarles criticizes the claims of other scholars for being too uncertain or speculative. Yet speculation is all over the place in Quarles’s treatment. This problem applies not only to details that simply cannot be known (e.g. 6, 22, 25, 82, 88, 100, 208, 216, 222, 260, 263) and the sheer number of perhaps-, may- (or may have-), possibly-, most likely-type statements found throughout the book, but also Quarles’s tendency to make a speculative claim and then proceed with the argument as though the claim were in fact valid and true.

Assessment

Thus, when it comes to recommendation, I find myself in a threefold quandary. First, this book is written for beginning College students and interested church members. In the main, I think it would be a usable resource for such an audience. However, and especially for those wanting to do more in Pauline Studies, it would be imperative for this book to be read alongside and even supplemented by other scholarly texts on Paul’s life and letters. The introductions by Capes-Reeves-Richards (2007), Bird (2009), and even Thiselton (2009) immediately come to mind. This supplementation would be necessary to balance and even undo the rather fanciful and speculative descriptions that Quarles occasionally offers.
Second, and following from the first, I could recommend this book only after issuing a necessary disclaimer—one that warns readers about the weaknesses noted above. Such weaknesses not only are inappropriate for a scholarly text but also cripple Quarles’s aim “to follow solid evidence in reconstructing Paul’s life” (ix). Thus, I would be apt to recommend any number of other life-of-Paul type books that avoid these tendencies and meet the aim more effectively. The recent treatment by Still and Longenecker (2014) is one example.

That brings me to the third part of the quandary: Quarles’s book, while certainly attempting to keep Pauline scholarship accessible and current, ultimately adds very little that is new to the discussion. In many ways, his treatment—not only in terms of format and style but also general content—reads like a condensed, blended, and slightly updated version of the more detailed studies on Paul from Bruce (1977) and McRay (2007), with a smattering of Knox (1987) and O’Conner (1996; 2005). The updates typically come in the form of occasional and sometimes random details about specific locations, customs, and practices. Two other noticeable differences would be Quarles’s use of color illustrations, instead of the usual black-and-white, and his slimming down or removal of technical issues so as not to overburden the non-specialist reader. But then again, there are other books that do that, too.

So, would I recommend this book? Yes, but with the disclaimer. Would I follow Akin and Wilder’s sentiment and “highly” or even “enthusiastically” recommend the book? No.

CARL S. SWEATMAN, PhD