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Tarrech, Barclay, and Frey's "The Last Years of Paul: Essays from the Tarragona Conference, June 2013" (Book Review)

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The Last Years of Paul: Essays from the Tarragona Conference, June 2013,
 edited by Armand Puig i Tàrrach, John M.G. Barclay and Jörg Frey. Tübingen:
 Mohr Siebeck, 2015. 570 pp. \$164.00. ISBN 9783161533464

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Did he stay or did he go? The Apostle Paul was in no doubt that he wanted to evangelize Spain, as Romans 15:24 makes perfectly clear. What is less clear – what is actually enshrouded in deep impenetrable fog – is whether Paul ever arrived at his intended destination. One of this scholarly volume's co-editors, Puig i Tàrrach, identifies the three schools of thought on the research behind Paul's possible Spanish journey: those who argue it never took place, those who argue that it did in fact take place, and those who, while accepting the possibility that it did take place, express significant doubt (pp. 469-70). At a June 2013 conference in Tarragona, where Paul may have alighted onto Spanish soil if ever he did actually arrive, the editors of *The Last Years of Paul* assembled a cadre of accomplished scholars – including N.T. Wright – who represent not only those three main schools of thought, but who occupy their own nuanced positions along the spectrum of opinion. The result is a collection of essays that reads well and advances the conversation despite the paucity of evidence one way or the other. Following Barclay's deliberately provocative and pessimistic introduction, the collection winds its way through the significance of the monetary gift to the Jerusalem church, the intricacies of Roman law vis-à-vis Paul's appeal to the emperor, Luke's silence about Paul's death, Paul in pseudepigraphical writings, and his literary activities in his later ministry. Naturally each essayist writes according to his or her own specialities and sensibilities, and all are worthy additions to the literature, sparse as it is. While each essay exhibited redeeming qualities, the standout contributions were those authored by Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, Daniel Marguerat, and Jörg Frey (the final essay, doubling as the conclusion). Depth of insight and breadth of research were the hallmarks of these particular chapters; Marguerat's footnotes added more than a few volumes to my library's acquisitions wish list. Unfortunately, but understandably given the scholarly audience of this volume, other essays neglect to translate passages from primary and secondary sources. Overall the contributors handled the biblical data with more respect than Barclay's introduction leads the reader to expect, but even so, the occasional off-the-cuff comment grounded in source and redaction criticism will raise the eyebrows of readers with more conservative views of the inspiration of Scripture. In the end, readers who are already up to speed with the biblical data on Paul's last years will learn more about ancient social models of benefaction and obligation, Roman legal history, and Mediterranean geography than Paul's last years, details about which are likely to remain forever out of reach due to the scarce state of the sources.