



*Prophets of Love: The Unlikely Kinship of Leonard Cohen and the Apostle Paul* by Matthew R. Anderson. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023. 192 pp. ISBN: 9780228018643.

Reviewed by Avery Brzobohaty, University of Toronto

Upon first glance, and perhaps even the second, the subject of this book is equal parts intriguing and befuddling. What could a twenty-first century lustful songwriter from Montreal and a first-century celibate biblical disciple possibly have in common? As it turns out: far more than one might expect. In this slim but richly layered text, Matthew R. Anderson invites readers along on a well-crafted and thought-provoking journey, reimagining and

(re)uniting the apostle Paul and Leonard Cohen as unlikely brothers in love, brokenness, and hope.

Published as part of the *Advancing Studies in Religion Series* from McGill-Queen's University Press, which is dedicated to advancing "the study of religion in method and theory, textual interpretation, theological studies, and the understanding of lived religious experience" (p. ii), this book not only fits the mandate but pushes the boundaries of comparative methodology and interdisciplinary study.

Anderson holds a Gatto Chair in Christian Studies at St. Francis Xavier University and serves as an affiliate professor of theological studies at Concordia University.<sup>1</sup> His scholarly works span a range of topics including pilgrimage, diversity and sustainability, and decolonizing biblical studies, though his theological specialization lies in Pauline studies (p. 6).<sup>2</sup> Anderson harbours deep love for both figures featured in this text but does not let this cloud his analysis. Paul and Leonard are presented as fully realized individuals, unsavory aspects included.<sup>3</sup>

Using their written works as the foundation for analysis, Anderson places Paul and Leonard into conversation to explore themes that illuminate striking parallels and fundamental divergences. Each chapter centers around a "thematic point of comparison" (p. 12): their enduring Jewish identities, preoccupation with Jesus, relationships with women, the denial or indulgence of desire,



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License

<sup>1</sup> "About," somethinggrand, Matthew Anderson, accessed September 12, 2025, at <https://somethinggrand.ca/about-something-gran/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Dr. Matthew Robert Anderson," Concordia University, accessed September 20, 2025, at <https://www.concordia.ca/faculty/matthew-anderson.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this book Anderson refers to both men primarily by their first names, arguing that such balance is necessary since Paul has no recorded surname (p. 6). Perhaps more importantly, this stylistic choice fosters a sense of familiarity and supports the book's central thesis of kinship. In keeping with this approach, I have opted to follow the same convention throughout this review.

masculinity, their shared mastery of rhetoric (a skill which Anderson also demonstrates throughout this work) divine calling, mysticism, bearing witness to brokenness and redemption, and their long afterlives (read: posthumous legacies). Combined, these chapters shed new light on the "profound depths of religious thinking" (p. 12) in Leonard's poetry while also introducing the most recent developments in Pauline scholarship. To achieve this breadth in such a concise monograph is ambitious, and while Anderson largely succeeds in balancing the two figures, some readers may find the treatment of Cohen's lyrics less robust than the analysis of Paul.

Each bite sized chapter ends with a "Text Meditation" comprised of a recommended Leonard song, a text penned by both men, and a one-line prompt encouraging readers to compare the two texts together. These meditations, which could easily be adapted into classroom activities, lend the book a devotional cadence that suits the religious studies genre. They also invite readers to pause and form their own connection and ideas. Following each meditation, a further reading section extends the conversation with additional sources and commentary, providing both scholarly grounding and practical guidance—a generous touch that readers of all levels are likely to appreciate.

Readers with an interest in gender and sexuality studies will find Anderson's chapters on relationships with women, asceticism, and masculinity particularly thought provoking. He situates each theme within its historical and cultural context, uncovering some of the most striking differences between Paul and Leonard, and deftly addresses the issue of misattributed texts. For both, erotic love and gender are closely tied to the divine but in profoundly different ways: Leonard idolizes—and at times tropifies—women and the female body, in binary with its male counterpart, and portrays their physical union as a sacred act of worship, drawing both partners closer to the divine. In addition, Anderson briefly but overtly problematizes Leonard's casual misogyny, pointing readers to sources to further contextualize it within the #MeToo movement (p. 74). Paul, by contrast, views gender as an unnecessary distinction, and sexuality as an inconvenient distraction from the pursuit of relationship with the divine (p. 50). Many readers are likely familiar with Paul as a figure whose letters have often been invoked justify the continued oppression and subservience of women (p. 48). Anderson firmly subverts this perception, drawing on recent scholarship on early Christianity to demonstrate that these misogynistic passages were written after Paul's death (p. 49), and stand direct opposition to Paul's authentic letters.<sup>4</sup> In these, Paul regularly honours the women in his life as "not only his equals, but also his mentors and superiors" (p. 47). By highlighting this historical complexity Anderson unsettles familiar assumptions about Paul and offers a fresh perspective in which to understand the intersections of gender, desire, and the sacred in both men's work.

Anderson's prose is consistently clear and engaging, striking a balance between accessibility and scholarly depth. The structure of short thematic chapters, expanded by the text meditations and further readings, makes this book adaptable to a range of contexts. In the undergraduate classroom, it could serve as an introduction to Pauline studies and the spiritual aspects of Cohen's

---

<sup>4</sup> Namely Titus and Timothy 1 and 2, Ephesians, and Colossians (p. 49).

lyrics, while graduate students and scholars are likely to appreciate the engagement with current scholarship and the envelope pushing methodology. General readers, too, will find the text highly rewarding: Anderson's warmth, and clever humour never lapse into jargon or heavy abstraction. As entertaining as it is informative this book will no doubt be enjoyed by a wide audience—from long-time fans of Paul and Leonard to those meeting them for the first time.

In *Prophets of Love*, Anderson offers more than just a study of two intriguing figures; he presents a model for comparative interdisciplinary scholarship. By placing Paul and Leonard into dialogue, he demonstrates how unlikely pairings can open new avenues of interpretation. The method is deceptively simple—reading two distinct voices against one another—but results in unique insights that might not be revealed in isolation. As such, this book enriches our understanding of Leonard and Paul's works and illustrates potential for further comparative work in the study of music and religion.

The book begins with a serendipitous juxtaposition that unfolds into a sustained exploration of love, brokenness, and hope. While there is an overwhelming multitude of similarities between Paul and Leonard, Anderson is careful never to collapse them into sameness; instead, he highlights their striking differences and that is where some of the most compelling moments of this book emerge. This project then, is less about reconciling contradictions than about inhabiting them—an approach that feels especially timely in our fractured age.