Paul between Jerusalem and Rome:
A Political Understanding of His Apostolate

Presentation to the International Seminar on St. Paul
Rome, April 22, 2009

Neil Elliott

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I am very grateful to the Society for the honor of the invitation to participate in this seminar, and especially to the Society of Saint Paul for his generous assistance in making my participation possible.

It is a paradoxical honor to gather with you in the city where Paul met his death. Not in Jerusalem, where he hoped his messianic vision of Israel and the nations united in worship would come to reality, but in the capital of a great Empire that executed him after the failure of his vision in Jerusalem, surrounded now by the monuments of that Empire. It is a city where the apostle's bones have been treasured by the Church through the centuries and recently brought again nearer the light. But of course, the apostle's legacy extends far beyond Rome, as this remarkably international gathering attests. I am a priest in a church that bears the apostle's name, in a city that bears his name, in a diocese founded as a mission diocese when Minnesota was a frontier territory of the United States. Part of my work at St. Paul's Episcopal Church has been to ask the congregation again and again to consider what their founding as a church named "St. Paul's" might mean for their vocation.

"And so we came to Rome."[i] I confess I have been as eager to visit the Basilica of St. Paul as any pilgrim, but your invitation has drawn me not so much because we gather near the apostle's bones, as because his spirit, his mind, his apostolate, which are so important for the charism of this Society, have been important in my own formation as well as a member of the church. If a number of contemporary philosophers can declare themselves to be Paulinists even though they are not Christians,[ii] I declare that I *am* a Christian *because* of Paul and *as* a Paulinist.

I have also been formed *as a scholar* by a contemporary community of scholars, employing diverse methods—historical-critical, social-scientific, postcolonial, and others—to explore the apostle's thought,

his history, his experience, the communities around him, and—I would argue, most importantly—his imagination. One result of that formation is the recognition that while Paul may be important to our Christianity, Christianity as we know it was not important to Paul, indeed did not exist. The company of Paul's scholarly interpreters now includes a number of world-renowned Jewish scholars, and many of their insights into Paul *as a Jew* are compelling. The weight of those insights suggests that it is anachronistic to read Paul as a Christian theologian.[iii] Rather Paul provides us one expression of the range of Judean life and thought in the first century C.E., and more specifically, I argue, one expression of the range of Judean responses to the Roman Empire.[iv] I do not mean to dismiss the theological interest in Paul, and as a Christian I share it and consider it vitally important. But as a historian I believe it is only after we have understood Paul *as a Jew,* situated "between Jerusalem and Rome," that we should ask what theological sense to make of him for our own very different time. That is the burden of this presentation.

It is also important for us to attune ourselves to the resonances of Paul beyond the confines of the church and of professional scholarship. Who is "Saint Paul" *in the world*? For that is surely where *he* took his stand; not staying comfortably within the Jerusalem temple, or the synagogue in Antioch, or among fellow philosophers on the Hill of Mars, but taking his place *in the world.* Indeed, given the metaphors that fill his letters, we might imagine that he found himself as much at home among military conscripts, athletes, and manual laborers as among the "religious." I will return to the subject of "Saint Paul in the world" in a second presentation.

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Moving beyond Reading Paul in Terms of Ethnicity

I take the invitation to speak on "Paul between Jerusalem and Rome" to be quite precise. To situate Paul between these two cities—what we might call the capitals of two empires, one the supreme political reality in Paul's world, the other the *basileia* that was the focus of ancient Israel's hopes and, for Paul, the

place where Israel's messiah and the world's true *Kyrios,* Jesus, would be honored by all the nations of the earth[v]—is an important way to frame our understanding of Paul. It is different from asking where Paul stood in relation to "Jews" and "Gentiles" (or *pagani*). The latter is certainly the dominant way we have all learned to talk about Paul: to understand his gospel as the proclamation of universal access to God, open to everyone regardless of their ethnicity, and to contrast that gospel with what we must on this reading imagine was the "exclusivism" practiced by Jewish communities in Paul's day. In the mid-20th century one of the most prevalent textbooks on the apostle, Günther Bornkamm's *Paul,* declared that in Romans, "Paul's opponent is not this or that section in a particular church, but the Jews and their understanding of salvation," by which he meant "their claim to possess [salvation] exclusively."[vi]

But there are important reasons to ask whether that approach is adequate or accurate for understanding Paul, and important reasons to move beyond that approach to ask as well about the social, cultural, and political aspects of Paul's environment and of his gospel. I take the phrase "between Jerusalem and Rome" to point us toward those larger political realities.

The hallmark of the so-called "new perspective" on Paul is the recognition that we simply cannot pose Paul's theology over against Judaism as its primary foil. Jewish scholars have long objected to the habit of posing Paul over against stereotyped portraits of Judaism as a religion of "works-righteousness" and, more recently, of ethnic exclusivism. But it is especially in the decades after the Holocaust that Christian scholarship has awakened to the dangers of anti-semitic assumptions and anti-Jewish themes in New Testament interpretation. E. P. Sanders's work has produced a "paradigm shift" by demonstrating that the sort of works-righteousness that Christian theology and New Testament scholarship have long attributed to Paul's Jewish contemporaries was the dramatic exception, to the extent it existed at all. James D. G. Dunn has ushered in a "new perspective" on Paul by insisting that Paul remained a faithful Jew even as he became an apostle of Jesus Christ, and that we must not purchase our appreciation of the apostle at the expense of caricatures of the Jew or of Judaism.[vii]

Other scholars, including Lloyd Gaston, William Campbell, and Stanley Stowers, have taught us to

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take seriously the fact that Paul wrote his letters *to non-Jews,* rather than to Jews, and to be much more cautious in drawing conclusions regarding "Paul's view of the law" or "Paul's view of Judaism." It is clear that Paul did not want non-Judeans in the churches to accept circumcision; but it is also clear he wanted them to respect both the Torah, which was "holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:12, 13, 14), and Israel, whose calling from God was "irrevocable" (Rom. 9:1-4, 11:29). Instead of asking "what, in Paul's view, was wrong with Judaism?" these scholars invite us to ask a more precise question with regard to Paul's letters: "what, in Paul's view, was wrong with the way non-Judeans in the Christ assemblies were regarding Judeans, Judaism, and the Torah?"[viii]

The answers that emerge when we ask that question are very different. In Galatians, the agenda that Paul opposes is not primarily a "Jewish" agenda. It is rather the desire of non-Judeans in the Galatian churches to adopt a few signal Jewish practices as a sort of religious camouflage, hoping to avoid the suspicion and harassment of their pagan neighbors.[ix] In Romans, Paul's concern is not anxiety that his non-Judean audience will "fall" into Jewish practice or be seduced by propaganda by the synagogue, but (quite the contrary) that their open disdain for the Judeans around them will jeopardize his project of gathering the "offering of the nations" before it has a chance to succeed.[x] These are not "Jewish" problems against which a Christian apostle struggles; they are misunderstandings or false directions taken by non-Jews in the Christ assemblies that Paul opposes as a *Jewish* apostle.

The challenges to the traditional habit of posing Paul against Judaism are not only historical challenges. We are aware as never before of the anti-Judaism that has been a part of much Christian interpretation, even when overt anti-Judaism was not its primary driving force. Martin Luther shared in the anti-Jewish prejudice of his day, but he also developed an interpretation of Paul that served his polemic against the Roman Catholic Church. He posed Paul against the Jewish works-righteousness of his contemporaries, even of the other (Jewish) apostles, as a way of driving a wedge between *his* interpretation of "apostolic" (Pauline) Christianity and the authority claimed by Rome as the See of Peter. In the modern period, some feminist and liberationist theologies have often aligned Judaism and the Jewish law with

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patriarchy and oppression in their efforts to portray Jesus or Paul as champions of liberation. Minority ethnic communities in the United States have embraced Paul's gospel of "universalism" as an alternative to the dominance of an Anglo-Saxon majority, just as Alain Badiou embraces Paul as the "foundation of universalism" to oppose a racially tinged Gallic nationalism in France. But often these moves have required aligning "Judaism" with racial prejudice. It would seem that wherever contemporary men and women "use Paul to think with," they are tempted to use a representation—or a misrepresentation—of Judaism "to think with" as well.[xi]

The net effect is not only that a pejorative stereotype of Judaism is perpetuated, but also that *ethnic difference* is made into the central problematic category in Paul's thought. This is not only a historical problem, as I will argue below. It also raises acute questions about the politics of contemporary interpretation. Some postcolonial interpreters have protested that just such concentration on ethnicity minimizes the significance of other, deeper dynamics, especially the continuing social and political dominance of global capitalism (and its military shadow) even in the "post-colonial" period. "Postcolonial" theory today is a battleground between theorists who emphasize the complex and ambiguous dimensions of culture, ethnicity, and identity in the colonial and "post"-colonial situation and those who insist that power relations, including enforced disparities in economic power, must be the primary focus of analysis.[xii]

Indeed, the focus on ethnicity may be seen as a trope of imperial ideology: highlighting ethnic difference as the most important problematic in human relations implies that *other* aspects of an imperial order are stable and satisfactory, if only the not-yet-civilized "natives" would learn to get along with each other. Contemporary U.S. culture provides abundant examples of the trope, as when we speak of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as only the latest stage of a primordial ethnic conflict, without reference to post-war history or the role of imperial powers in creating and aggravating the conflict: "those people have never gotten along in that land for thousands of years." Or when North Americans celebrate a "post-racial era" with the election of a president with an African father, disregarding the tremendous disparities that continue to separate African Americans from other Americans in terms of household income, life

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expectancy, incarceration rates, and other indices. Or when we look on conflicts in the former Yugoslavia or in Darfur as primarily "ethnic" in character without recognizing the role that Cold War politics and the contemporary geopolitical strategy of outside powers have played in channeling both resources and weapons to rival groups.[xiii] It is telling that in the United States, Martin Luther King is officially remembered as a champion of racial harmony; his criticism of capitalism and of U.S. imperialism in the Vietnam War, voiced with increasing stridency in the last year before his assassination, are scarcely mentioned in polite society.

A similar point pertains with regard to the study of Paul. Focusing our interpretation of Paul on the categories of ethnic inclusion and exclusion restricts the horizon of our imagination and prevents our recognizing the political dimensions of Paul's environment, and thus of his thought and practice. And it serves to isolate Pauline interpretation from meaningful interaction with larger themes and concerns that are vital to the survival of the majority of the world's people in the contemporary global order.

Jews under Roman Rule

In his recent book *Rome and Jerusalem: A Clash of Civilizations,* historian Martin Goodman is concerned precisely with how Jews fared in the Roman Empire. His interest, and mine, is in the ever-shifting patterns in Roman policy and their actual effects on Jewish populations (as distinct from the *declared* policies of one or another Emperor). His work, like the work of others (Seth Schwartz, Erich Gruen, John Barclay), focuses attention on the complexity of interactions between Jews and the Roman imperial order in different places and at different times, and necessarily goes beyond a single, essentialized understanding of Judaism as a religion in the Roman Empire.[xiv]

My thesis in *The Arrogance of Nations* is that what Paul says regarding Jews, Israel, and the law in Romans must be read in the wider rhetorical context of other discourses, especially Roman imperial ideology and propaganda, concerning the same subjects. Paul was not offering theological generalities or a

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"summary" of his gospel in this letter; he was responding to tensions between Judeans and non-Judeans in (and probably surrounding) the Roman congregations. But these tensions were not simply the inevitable, quasi-"natural" result of ethnic formations as such. They sprang from a specific history with social and political contours. Romans can be read—I argue, Romans *should* be read—as Paul's response, as a Jewish apostle of Jesus Christ, to the representations of Israel and of Judeans current in Roman imperial ideology.

As John G. Gager has pointed out in his study of *The Origins of Anti-Semitism,* after Octavian's defeat of Antony in 31 B.C.E. "Roman power was the basic fact for all the inhabitants of the Mediterranean basin," and it was Roman power "that created the conditions" in which anti-Semitism, exemplified in the crisis in Alexandria, came to life.[xv]

From the time of Pompeii's subjection of Jerusalem in 63 B.C.E., the Roman aristocracy had looked upon Judeans as a defeated people. Cicero had derided them as a people "born to servitude" (naturally enough, since many of the Jews around him would have been the children of the captives Pompeii had brought back from Jerusalem as slaves). Cicero spoke of their contributions to the Jerusalem temple as a sign of their misanthropy: they deprived their local economies of the funds that they sent to a foreign power. Julius Caesar patronized the Judean population to win their support in his rivalry with Cicero and others, and Augustus continued a policy of favor toward the Judeans, but only after Herod submitted himself after having backed Antony against him.

In 19 C.E., the Emperor Tiberius deported four thousand Judeans to Sardinia to fight pirates and expelled the rest of the Judean community from Rome. Philo regarded the Emperor as the pawn of his viciously anti-Jewish advisor Sejanus (who probably represented a deeper vein in the Roman aristocracy); Josephus considered Tiberius's action an overreaction to a local scandal in which some Judean conmen had defrauded a Senator's wife of money. The expulsion might also have been a routine imperial reaction to unrest: Leonard Rutgers notes that there were riots in Rome protesting grain shortages, and Tiberius may simply have struck at a convenient target, a minority population both conspicuous and vulnerable, to make an example of them and thus restore law and order in the streets.[xvi]

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Popular resentment of taxes in Egypt helped to spark the disaster in Alexandria in 38. Some Judeans had petitioned the governor to be granted citizenship and thus relieved of taxation. Once Gaius ("Caligula") came to power, Greek aristocrats in Alexandria who knew that the Roman governor, Flaccus, had opposed Gaius blackmailed Flaccus into enacting anti-Judean policies. These included the confiscation of synagogue property, a decree that Judeans were "strangers and aliens" in the city, and forced relocation of Jews into the first known "ghetto" in the world. Flaccus then allowed the arrests, humiliation, and scourging of elders of the Judean community, which deteriorated into a general pogrom that lasted for weeks. The Emperor Gaius used force to suppress the unrest and quickly removed Flaccus (whom he condemned to death). Philo tells us what happened next: the Greek aristocrats and the Jewish leadership sent rival embassies to Rome to appeal their case to Gaius. The Emperor treated the Jewish embassy with open contempt and revealed the devastating news that he had ordered a statue of himself erected in the Jerusalem Temple. Only his assassination by a conspiracy of his own officers—and the shrewd delay of his governor in Syria, Petronius—prevented the catastrophe that would have followed.[xvii]

Upon his accession in 41, the Emperor Claudius moved quickly to put down the violence in Alexandria, sentencing two of the Greek instigators to death. But he used the harshest language against the Judean population, blaming them for the most recent violence, denying them any right to citizenship, cutting off immigration from Judea and Syria, and warning that he would respond to any further trouble by treating the Judeans as the source of a "plague" that had contaminated Roman Egypt.[xviii]

At this point Roman policy was beginning to crystallize as hostility to the Judean cause and to Judean populations. Wildly pejorative caricatures of the Jews had been given a serious hearing in Rome. The promise of Roman law and order had been that people in the provinces could aspire to "becoming Roman" while "staying Greek"—or Judean—through two channels: first, civic piety (adjusted in the case of Judea to mean the daily sacrifices offered in the Temple on the Emperor's behalf); and second, euergetism, the doing of "good works" on behalf of the city (and thus emulating Augustus himself, whose "good works" were a centerpiece of Roman ideology, not least in the *Res Gestae*).[xix] In Alexandria, that

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fragile promise had collapsed, and Philo gives us reason to imagine that this collapse brought on an acute crisis for Judeans throughout the Roman Empire.

The next episodes took place in Rome itself. In 49, Claudius expelled at least some Judeans from the capital. Interpreters have usually assumed that his reasons had to do mostly with Judean misconduct, and a distinctly "Christian" interpretation has assumed that their misconduct was the violent rejection of Christian evangelists in Rome. A more likely explanation is that Claudius, urged on by an advisor as anti-Jewish as Sejanus had been in Tiberius's day, "rounded up the usual suspects"—the vulnerable Jewish population—to quell a wider popular unrest in the city. "Rome intervened," Leonard Rutgers argues, "because there were disturbances" in the city in which some Jews may have taken part; the Judeans may have been "just a convenient group whose expulsion could serve as an example to re-establish peace and quiet among the city populace at large."[xx]

Nero's Rescript and the Occasion of Romans

It is now practically a consensus among interpreters that Romans was written to respond to the aftermath of that expulsion.[xxi] Claudius died in 54 C.E.—poisoned by his wife and his stepson, many in the streets believed—and was quickly deified by an act of the Senate, prompted by his successor, Nero. The young Emperor quickly fashioned a new persona emphasizing his mercy, *clementia,* which surpassed even the benevolence of the great Augustus. It is only a hypothesis, but widely accepted as a cornerstone of interpretation today, that one of Nero's acts of clemency was to cancel Claudius's edict of expulsion and to allow former Judean residents to return to Rome. These Judeans—whether or not they had been a majority of the city's Judean population—would have returned under unfavorable circumstances. Their homes and businesses would have been confiscated; their social institutions, including the social spaces for assembling together, for some measure of self-governance, and for securing their own foods, would have been weakened at least. After this point we read the Roman satirists using "weak" Judeans as stock characters in

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their satires: beggars who foul the city's parks, poor Judeans who smell of the inferior vegetables they use in their soups.[xxii]

Wolfgang Wiefel gathered many of these threads into his argument that Paul wrote to a Christ assembly in which non-Judeans had come to look upon the returning Judeans with contempt, and that Paul wrote specifically to oppose that attitude (as he does with the prophetic warning in Rom. 11:13-24). Christian interpreters have tended to embrace one half of Wiefel's argument—to agree that Paul wrote to warn non-Judeans not to show arrogance to an apparently fallen Israel. But while Wiefel provided abundant evidence for anti-Jewish attitudes *in the wider environment of Rome,* many Christian interpreters have given his argument a peculiarly theological spin. They have argued—or more often, assumed—that the reason for the arrogance shown by non-Judean believers in Christ was that Jews had rejected the Christian gospel. It was, on this view, a "failure of the Christian mission" that put Jews in such a bad light and that prompted Paul to respond with this agonizing letter.

I disagree with that tendency for several reasons. First, it isn't necessary to explain Romans: Wiefel's demonstration of a wider Roman animosity to Judeans accounts for the letter's occasion by itself. Second, it makes no sense of parts of Paul's letter that Christians have often had difficulty assimilating, namely, those parts where Paul insists that though Israel has "stumbled," they have *not* "stumbled so as to fall" (11:11), God has *not* rejected them (11:1). Some interpreters read Romans as if those are the inevitable consequences of Paul's own theology, and that Paul fails to draw them only because his deeply felt sympathy for his own people prevents him from seeing that. I disagree. It seems hardly likely that Paul should work so vehemently to deny a perception that he shared, namely, that Israel had in fact "fallen." We can read the agonized rhetoric in chaps. 9—11 as prompted by the historical situation of Judeans in Rome without assuming that their reaction *to the Christian gospel* was a factor.[xxiii]

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The Purpose of Romans

My disagreement with this widely accepted viewpoint is part of a larger view of the purpose of Romans. Much of Christian interpretation has read the letter as an argument with Judaism or a critique of Judaism, taking its cue from the imaginary dialogue that begins in 2:17: "so you call yourself a Jew?" Sometimes this reading has focused on Paul's supposed critique of Jewish works-righteousness; sometimes, more recently, it has seen Romans as Paul's effort to legitimize the "Gentile church" against the objections of a prejudicial Jewish-Christian wing of the church that included the other apostles.

I have argued in several books that a close reading of the rhetoric of Romans leads to different conclusions. Paul addresses himself throughout to non-Judeans, to "the nations" (*ethnesin,* "among whom you also are," 1:6, 13-14). This letter is an effort to advance Paul's larger apostolic mission, which is to achieve "the (faithful) obedience of the nations" (1:5; 15:18). One expression of that mission is the collection, gathered from Macedonia and Achaia, which Paul is prepared to take to Jerusalem (15:25-27). He has not had time to gather financial contributions from the Romans, though he implies that he would have liked to, and would like to still in the future (15:22-32). In the meantime, however, he writes this letter of exhortation to secure a form of obedience among the nations *in Rome* that will ensure the sanctity of the offering of the nations that he takes to Jerusalem (15:14-16). Note that Paul thinks in priestly terms (1:9, 15:16): his first motive is to ensure that the offering he makes to God is holy. That requires that the Roman believers present *themselves* as a holy "living sacrifice," and that requires in turn that they resist conformity to the "mind" of this world (12:1-2)—a resistance that sets the stage for the exhortations that follow in chapters 12—15.

Everything that comes before this exhortation leads up to it, builds toward it. With a growing number of scholars I regard chapters 9—11—the chapters that concern Israel and that warn non-Judeans against arrogance and boasting—as the climax of the letter. But that means these chapters are not a digression, nor are they the result of a wishful nostalgia on Paul's part. *They express the purpose of the letter.* The earlier chapters are intended to prepare the audience for the appeal Paul makes regarding Israel.

I think this makes sense if we recognize different kinds of *dissociative argument* in this letter,

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arguments that distinguish what *seems* to be the case from what actually *is* reality.[xxiv]

- Paul may first set up an implicit contrast between the power of God, who has raised the Son of God from the dead by a spirit of holiness, from the fraudulent claims of a Roman order that assigns Emperors to heaven and identifies "sons of God" by senatorial decree (1:1-4)—imperial claims that were the object of ridicule among the Roman elite in just the time period when Paul wrote this letter;[xxv]
- He then dissociates the false claim of justice, made by human beings who in their injustice suppress the truth, from the true justice of God, which is manifest in the punishment of evildoers (1:15-32);
- This means that there is no basis for presuming on God's mercy to relieve one from accountability: there is no "impunity" before God, all are subject to God's absolute requirement of obedience (2:1-16);
- An imaginary dialogue with "the Jew" shows that the Jew agrees with all this: Jews, whatever their misconduct (in recent civic disturbances, perhaps, in Rome, or in Alexandria?), do not claim any presumption on God's mercy; rather they acknowledge that God's judgment is absolute and right (2:17—3:20).
- The consequence of all this is that those who are in Christ do not have any basis to presume on God's mercy; they, too, must present themselves bodily as instruments of justice; being "in Christ" provides no excuse for sinning (3:21-31; 6:1-23). (Thus the audience is prepared for the exhortation in 12:1-2 and following.)
- The intervening chapters are aimed specifically to non-Judeans to counteract possible misunderstandings of Paul's gospel. Yes, they may have become children of God, but that does not mean that they have supplanted the Jews, for being a child of God has always been a matter of faithful obedience—not of ethnic ancestry (Romans 4). (I presume, though many Christian interpreters do not, that other Jews would have agreed with Paul on this point.) And yes, they may enjoy the forgiveness of past sins through Christ's death, but Paul takes pains to emphasize that

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Christ came *not* to provide an infinite, ever-renewable "bailout" to the ongoing indebtedness of human sin, but to make possible obedience to God in the reign of life rather than slavery to sin in the reign of death (Romans 5).[xxvi]

- Most importantly, in chapters 9—11, Paul seeks to dissociate the apparent results of history—that Israel *appears* to have stumbled and fallen, to have been "broken off" as branches so that others could take Israel's place—from reality: that Israel has *not* fallen; that Israel's calling is "irrevocable"; that God is able to graft dead, broken branches back onto the living tree. Once we read these chapters as dissociative argument, we see that in these chapters any "typology" between the elect and the damned, the chosen and the lost, is completely absent.[xxvii]

One comparison may highlight the distinctiveness of this reading of Romans. A conventional theological reading finds in Romans 8 a series of assurances to the Christian that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39). These assurances stand in dramatic contrast to the pathos Paul expresses in the words that follow: "I have great sorrow and increasing anguish in my heart, for I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people" (9:3). Christian readers have naturally gravitated to the assurances, which are taken as simple declarations of fact, and wondered what to do with the expression of pathos—other than to say, "poor Paul."

But a rhetorically sensitive reading notes the echoes, the connections, against the artificial boundary that a subsequent Christian scribe inserted between chapter 8 and chapter 9. It is the Spirit who assures those who are in Christ that they are children of God (8:16), but it is the same Spirit who testifies to Paul's sorrow, and by whom he takes an oath (9:1-2). All that is said about God's "foreknowledge" in the predestination of God's children (8:29-30) is surpassed in the privileges bestowed on Israel (9:4-5). And the solemn assurance that *nothing* "in all creation" can separate those "in Christ" from the love of God finds its dramatic contrapuntal echo in Paul's devout wish to be separated from God for the sake of his fellow Israelites (9:2). The contrasts are meant to evoke an emotional response that strengthens the argumentative

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appeal in 9:1-5. That is, the assurances in Romans 8 are meant to intensify the evocation of emotion in Romans 9. Paul wants to move his non-Judean audience, not merely to overhear but *to share,* his concern for his people.[xxviii]

But this is not enough for Paul (which is why the letter does not end at 9:5). He does not speak to the non-Judeans in the Roman church as people secure in their position, able to look down from a position of privilege on the poor, forlorn Judeans. The warning to which Paul is driven in 11:13-25 makes clear that they can *not* presume on their position, rather it can be lost—*they* can be lost, "cut off," if they continue in arrogant contempt of Israel (11:22). Paul declares that the "broken off" branches of Israel can be grafted in "for God has the power" to do so (11:23), but he makes no parallel assurance here to the non-Judeans in the Roman church. *Their* situation is more precarious.

Past generations of Christians have read this letter as a charter of Christian privilege: "nothing can separate *us* from the love of God." And we have even imagined that this is a privilege Israel no longer shares. But Paul's purpose is quite the contrary. Even the status of being "in Christ" will *not* avail those who persist in contempt of Israel; they can yet be "cut off" from God because of their blindness, their failure to lift their eyes from present circumstances to recognize God's eternal purpose. It is not Israel that is imperiled in Paul's vision, it is the nascent Church.

Paul and the Ideology of Imperialism

Please pardon my self-indulgence in reciting themes in my recent book. My purpose is to emphasize the distinctive aspects of a reading of Romans that takes seriously both the rhetorical dynamics of the letter and its possible effect on an audience already shaped not only by their previous exposure to a gospel about Christ, but by their undoubted exposure—what we should presume had been their *saturation*—in a gospel about the salvation available in the Roman order.

What might imperil the Roman congregations, what might place them in the position of those who

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have rebelled against God (1:18-32)—that is, of those for whom Paul does *not* hold out hope—is their succumbing to the dominant themes of Roman imperial ideology. From Cicero and Virgil to the *Res Gestae* and the poets of Nero's age—Paul's contemporaries, who waxed eloquent on the glorious salvation brought near in Nero's accession—Rome proclaimed a clear, consistent, and unavoidable gospel. Piety and "works" went hand-in-hand: so proclaimed the statues of the pious Augustus in every Roman city. Roman law secured justice for all who were faithful. The clemency of the Emperor might be extended to those who had resisted Rome in the past but now surrendered in obedience. The present order expressed the final consummation of human history, the outworking of ancient promises given by the gods to the ancestors of the Emperor and now extended, through his beneficence, to the Roman people and to all who held faith with them.[xxix]

The inevitable implications were clear enough. Those who did *not* enjoy the blessings of cordial relations with Rome were the stubborn opponents of a divine order, the enemies of heaven. These obviously—visibly—included the Judeans who clogged the alleyways of Rome itself.

Given this context, Paul's protests *in this letter* must have seemed counter-intuitive, improbable, even impossible. That is why Paul cannot rely on what any reasonable person could observe, he must resort to solemn oaths before God (9:1), the testimony of scripture (throughout the letter), and the pronouncement of "mysteries" (11:25). History is *not* what it so evidently seems. It is only the misleading prelude to the ultimate and inevitable revealing of God's purposes.[xxx]

Hearing Paul in Our Own Day

Please forgive my self-indulgence in rehearsing so much of the work in my recent book. I stated earlier that I believe we should seek to apprehend the apostle theologically only after we have made sense of him in his historical context. I have read Romans not as a Christian theological treatise but as an articulate *Jewish* protest, made by a Jewish apostle of the messiah Jesus, against the representations of

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Roman imperial ideology of Israel as a defeated people. Romans marks a moment of tremendous stress, of crisis, in the first-century struggle "between Jerusalem and Rome." It is, so far as we know, the last text from the first century that held out hope that the ancient aspirations of Israel would survive the power of Rome. (Others, we know, carried such aspirations with them in the decade following Paul's death, but they did not leave texts behind; meanwhile, the texts in our New Testament that follow Paul's letters all come from the terrible period after the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome, and are in part reactions to it.[xxxi])

What are we to make of this theologically? I will not presume to speak here with any authority but my own. But *every* interpretation of the past relies on analogy, and we must own our responsibility for the terms of analogy that we choose.[xxxii]

I consider it evident enough that we have misunderstood Paul in important ways when we have read him through the later epistle to the Ephesians, and rendered his gospel merely a matter of ethnic unity in Christ. In Ephesians, the church itself has become the "mystery" revealed to Paul, which already shows that the horizon of Paul's own vision has collapsed (compare Eph. 1:9; 3:3-6 with Rom. 11:25-26). Perhaps that was inevitable: Paul's own vision was so clearly disproved by history. The "offering of the nations" did *not* awaken the regime in Jerusalem to the dawning of a new messianic age as Paul expected. To the contrary, his gesture was perceived as an untimely and intolerable provocation and was immediately suppressed (according to Acts 21:17-26). And that, the author of Acts declares, is how, eventually, "we came to Rome," and (though Acts demurs from continuing the story) to Paul's death. But the failure of his vision in the first century, and the failure (or at least deferment) of liberatory projects in our own, mean that in precise terms Paul is our contemporary.

Further, while it is of the utmost importance to recognize and counteract centuries of Christian anti-Judaism, important voices—from within the Jewish community as well as isolated Christian voices—remind us today that we cannot simply gloss "Israel" in Paul's letters by equating it with present-day Jews in any way that would constitute Christian acquiescence in the policies of the modern state of Israel, including the brutality carried out in the occupied territories.[xxxiii] Such an equation obscures the real

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disparity between the political vulnerability of Judeans in Roman cities—which, as I have argued, is an important factor in the context of Romans—and the military strength and political impunity enjoyed by the current state of Israel because of the continual intervention of its superpower patron, which shields it from accountability to international law.

It is clear that for Paul, Judeans were among "the poor" (in Jerusalem: Rom. 15:26-27) and "the weak" (Rom. 14:1-2, 15:1); his exhortation to non-Judeans is framed by the command to "take your place alongside the oppressed" (Rom. 12:16). That was not a romantic perception of his own people. It was a view shared, and encouraged, by the Roman proponents of imperial propaganda, from Cicero to Seneca, who regarded the Judeans as a defeated people incapable and unworthy of sharing as full participants in Roman civilization. Again, it is just this *imperial* representation that I hold to be the object of Paul's polemic in this letter.

It is not an inappropriate analogy, then, for us to reflect on Paul's legacy today by asking pointed questions about our own time and the present world order:

What myths about the "end of history" are current among the elite today?[xxxiv]

What stereotypes prevail in our societies about the poor, and especially foreigners, as inferior peoples not deserving of the benefits that the rich enjoy (even as they make the comforts of the rich possible)? What myths about the inevitability of the present capitalist order and about the necessity of adapting our economies to safeguard the wealth of the rich surround us?[xxxv]

What representations concerning the innocence of powerful nations fuel campaigns of domination and conquest today?[xxxvi]

And most important for Christian theology: what social, political, economic, and cultural pressures are exerted upon the churches to elicit approval, or at least acquiescence, in these patterns?[xxxvii]

These questions are not alien to Christian theology, at least as practiced by the theologians of liberation. It is not surprising that they have from time to time found Paul not only a resource, but a foundation as they have articulated a theological bias for the poor and for a "civilization of poverty" and

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solidarity over against a civilization of wealth and exploitation.[xxxviii] The greatest peril facing the churches may be the temptation to avoid such questions and retreat into a narrowly "theological" reading of the apostle.

Notes

[i] Acts 28:14.

[ii] See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (trans. Ray Brassier; Cultural Memory in the Present [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003]); Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (trans. Dana Hollander; Cultural Memory in the Present [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004; German original 1993, compiled from lectures given in 1987]); Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy worth Fighting for?* (New York: Verso, 2000); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Trans. Patricia Dailey [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005]); and Christian theologian Theodore Jennings, Jr., *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul: Justice* (Cultural Memory in the Present [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006]), and my own reflections in "Ideological Constraint and the Christ Event: A Marxist Response to Alain Badiou's Paul," in *Paul's Journeys among the Philosophers* (ed. Douglas Harink [Eugene, Or.: Cascade, forthcoming]).

[iii] Here several works bear particular mention: Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of New Testament Images of Jesus* (2nd ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Pamela Eisenbaum, "Paul, Polemics, and the Problem of Essentialism," *Biblical Interpretation* 13:3 (2005) 224-38, and *Reading Paul as a Jew* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, forthcoming); and Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

[iv] Here I use the term *Judean* rather than *Jew* to include the ethnic and national connotations that *Ioudaios* bore along with the religious connotations we associate with the English word *Jew*: see my discussion in *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Paul in Critical Contexts [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008]), 16.

[v] Rom. 15:1-13, 18-19, 25-27.

[vi] Günther Bornkamm, *Paul* (New York: Harper, 1971), 94-5.

[vii] E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977);
James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul." *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 (1983); *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

[viii] Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987); William S. Campbell, *Paul's Gospel in an Intercultural Context* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991); Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

[ix] In different essays, Lloyd Gaston proposed different readings of Paul's critique of "works of law" as alternatives to the Lutheran reading: that it represented an anxious Gentile legalism, or that it represented the poisonous "work" (effect) of the law regarding Gentiles specifically (*Paul and the Torah,* 57-58, 69-72, and 100-6). I pursued similar arguments in *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 134-38; 197-98. See now the important arguments by Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Reimagined* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), and Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

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[x] This summarizes my own approach to Romans in *The Rhetoric of Romans: Argumentative Constraint and Strategy and Paul's Dialogue with Judaism* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1990); in *Liberating Paul*; and in *The Arrogance of Nations.*

[xi] Here important criticisms have been raised especially by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza: see *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Critical Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1983), and most recently, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). See also Tat-Siong Benny Liew, "Margins and (Cutting-) Edges: On the (Il)legitimacy and Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, and (Post)Colonialism," in *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections* (ed. Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia; London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 114-65.

[xii] Chandra Talpade Mohante speaks in this context of a "harmonious, empty pluralism" that "bypasses power as well as history" in its analysis (*Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003], 193); Leela Gandhi, of the tendency for some "post"-colonial discourse to ignore "problems of 'neocolonialism'—held in place by transnational corporations and the international division of labour" (*Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1998], chap. 9, "The Limits of Postcolonial Theory," 175). Mahmood Mamdani continues to document the quasi-ethnic aspects of Western discourse about Muslims that erase the political conditions that have generated radical Islamist groups (*Good Muslim, Bad Muslim Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* [New York: Pantheon, 2004]). Aijaz Ahmad calls theorists to begin from the starkest recognition of the "structural distortions" of the present "global hegemony" of global capital (*In Theory, Classes, Nations, Literatures* [London and New York: Verso, 1992], chap. 8).

[xiii] Mahmood Mamdani offers a case in point in his history of the Darfur crisis, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror.* (New York: Pantheon, 2009). I discuss the tendency in the West to ignore political realities and to focus on "ethnicity" as the root of conflicts, and offer further examples, in *The Arrogance of Nations,* 47-50.

[xiv] John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 B.C.E.—117 C.E.)* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996); Erich Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (New York: Vintage, 2007); Seth Schwartz, Imperialism and Jewish Society 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[xv] John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 43. For what follows see also *The Arrogance of Nations,* chap. 3.

[xvi] Leonard V. Rutgers, "Roman Policy toward the Jews: Expulsions from the City of Rome during the First Century C.E.," in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome* (ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 93-116). I discuss this sequence of events in *The Arrogance of Nations,* 91-100. Primary sources are Josephus, *Ant.* 18.3.5, and Philo, *Embassy,* 159-61.

[xvii] Here our primary source is Philo, *In Flaccus*; see John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 43-54, and Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[xviii] Schäfer, *Judeophobia,* 137-38; Josephus, *Ant.* 19.278; an alternative version of Claudius's edict was discovered in the 20th century: A. Fuks, V. Tcherikover, and M. Stern, eds., *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicorum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 2:36-55.

[xix] Greg Woolf, "Becoming Roman, Staying Greek: Culture, Identity, and the Civilizing Process in the Roman East," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 40 (1994) 116-43; and "Beyond Romans and Natives," *World Archaeology* 28:3 (1995) 339-50.

[xx] See Elliott, *Arrogance of Nations,* 96-99; H. Dixon Slingerland, *Claudian Policymaking and the Early Imperial Repression of Judaism at Rome* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997).

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[xxi] See for example the essays in *Romans* (Pauline Theology, vol. 3, ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). One exception is Philip F. Esler, who seeks to minimize the importance of Claudius's expulsion in order to explain conflicts in Rome on the basis of a theory of ethnic conflict (*Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003]).

[xxii] Wolfgang Wiefel first put this argument forward in "The Jewish Community in Ancient Rome and the Origins of Roman Christianity" (original essay 1971, reprinted in *The Romans Debate,* rev. and exp. ed. by Karl P. Donfried [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991], 85-101). On Judean beggars in public, Martial, *Epigram* 10.57.13; Juvenal, *Sat.* 2.11; 6.541-44. On diet, Juvenal ridicules the figure of a Judean beggar who subsists on beans, leeks, vinegar, and boiled leather (*Sat.* 3). Josephus describes priests who could maintain a kosher diet only by subsisting on figs and nuts (*Life* 3). Hans-Werner Bartsch attributes the conflict between "weak" and "strong" (Romans 14-15) to just these circumstances ("Die antisemitischen Gegner des Paulus im Römerbrief," in *Antijudaismus im Neuen Testament?* [ed. W. Eckert et al.; Munich: Kaiser, 1967], 27-43, and "Die historische Situation des Römerbriefes," *Studia Evangelica* 4 [1968]: 282-91); his arguments are much more fully developed by Mark Reasoner, *"Weak" and "Strong" in Romans 14:1—15:13* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[xxiii] I make this argument at much greater length in *The Arrogance of Nations,* 107-11.

[xxiv] I draw the category of "dissociative argumentation," on which I rely throughout *The Arrogance of Nations,* from Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965]).

[xxv] *The Arrogance of Nations,* 59-72.

[xxvi] I elaborated this argument in *The Rhetoric of Romans.*

[xxvii] *The Arrogance of Nations,* chap. 3.

[xxviii] I explored these connections first in *Rhetoric of Romans,* 261-64.

[xxix] Here poets like Calpurnius Piso and Calpurnius Siculus, and the anonymous author of the Einsiedeln *Eclogues,* are invaluable testimonies to the ideological currents contemporary with Romans. I argue in *The Arrogance of Romans* that such texts, alongside Israelite scriptures, should be the object of any investigation of "intertextuality" in Paul's letters (27-43).

[xxx] This aspect of Paul's "dissociative argumentation" is the concern of chaps. 3 and 5 in *The Arrogance of Nations.*

[xxxi] This is especially the argument of Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ.*

[xxxii] Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), chap. 1 (on interpretation).

[xxxiii] Here, unfortunately, the protests of Marc Ellis (*Unholy Alliance: Religion and Atrocity in Our Time* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997], and other works) and Rosemary Radford Ruether (*The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002]) and, most recently, Mark Braverman (a current project on mainstream Christian acquiescence in Zionism) are rare enough that they are normally labeled "prophetic," a euphemism for "marginalized."

[xxxiv] The most obvious reference is to Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Penguin, 1992). The celebration of the "end of history" was cut short, at least in the U.S., by the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, which have been represented in official U.S. rhetoric as signaling the final cosmic confrontation between good and evil, a "clash of civilizations." See *The Arrogance of Nations,* chap. 5.

[xxxv] Obviously these are the themes of much recent national debate in the United States—and locally as well, where spokesmen for the "conservative" cause have repeated shrill warnings in letters to the newspaper that the wealthy will "take their money and leave" if they are threatened with the repeal of tax cuts.

[xxxvi] Critics in the United States have observed that President Obama's declared rationale for a troop buildup in Afghanistan is

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virtually indistinguishable from President Bush's rhetoric during the Iraq War: ". . . the United States of America stands for peace and security, justice and opportunity. That is who we are, and that is what history calls on us to do once more" (March 27). The families of numerous civilians killed (as "collateral damage") by U.S. airstrikes might well have a different view of what the United States stands for.

[xxxvii] I pursued these questions with regard to churches in the U.S. in "A Famine of the Word: A Stringfellowian Reflection on the Situation of U.S. Churches," *The Bible in the Public Square: Reading the Signs of the Times,* ed. Ellen B. Aitken, Jonathan Draper, and Cynthia Briggs Kittredge (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

[xxxviii] I consider Jon Sobrino's recent work *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008) the clearest available articulation of these themes and a powerful manifesto for the future of the church.

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