

## Introduction

### GETTING READY TO READ ROMANS

Why another book on Paul's letter to the Romans? Since the early third century, when Origen wrote his extensive commentary, this letter has been the most commented-upon text in the New Testament.

Romans is generally read as an exposition of Christian doctrine or (more recently) as a window into early Christianity. Here I will propose another way of reading the text. I will read it as a text that deals with the most fundamental questions of what might be called political philosophy, that is, a thinking of the political, a thinking of the way in which human life is to be ordered as a corporate or common life. Specifically, I will argue that Paul may be read as developing a messianic politics that stands in contrast to the political order established by Rome and as an alternative to the polity of "Moses" or of the "Judeans." In Paul's day there had already been attempts by Jewish intellectuals to argue for the superiority of Judean or Mosaic political order to the political order of Rome (Stowers 35). Both Judean and Roman polity had in common that they conceived of the political in terms of the basic law that structured common life. In this they were in a certain continuity with the thinking of the political that had characterized the approaches of Plato and Aristotle, who approached the political as a question of providing a legal order that would produce a just arrangement of social life. Thus, Aristotle, after famously affirming that the human being was the political life-form (*zōon politikon*), maintained that "justice is the bond of men in states. For the administration of justice, which is the determination of what is just, is the principle of

order in political society" (*Politics* 1253a.37–39). His teacher, Plato, had offered reflections on an ideal political organization oriented toward justice in texts such as *The Republic*, *The Statesman*, and *The Laws*. Indeed, it appears that Plato attempted to put his ideas into practice in terms of developing a constitution for Syracuse. This attempt was based in part upon the notion that the principal exemplars of political order represented by Cyprus, Sparta, and Athens all had their polity derived from a lawgiver (Solon of Athens, Minos of Crete, Lycurgus of Sparta) who had provided a wise constitution or basic set of laws to govern the common life of the people (Plato, *Laws* 1.624–631). Given this notion of the lawgiver and the attempts of Plato and Aristotle to offer ideal constitutions, it is easy to see how Moses also could be understood as the founder of a sort of political or constitutional order.

At least since the time of Augustine, theologians have known that Paul is concerned in Romans with the themes that were the common currency of political thinking: law and justice. But it is also the case that most readings of Romans have deflected attention away from this political question in order to focus upon the situation of the individual believer in relation to God. This has also meant that the text has been read primarily as a religious rather than a political text. Of course, this dichotomy would probably not have been intelligible to Paul (or to Plato or Caesar Augustus for that matter), but the political and philosophical character of Paul's argument has receded from view. The result is that the text is read as a book of the church that concerns narrowly religious issues. Indeed, in English this process has been exacerbated by the disappearance of "justice" (and "injustice") from the translation of the text. Terms like "righteousness," "unrighteousness," and "wickedness" have been substituted to make the political significance of what Paul is up to disappear behind a fog of religiosity.

The reading of this text that I propose here breaks with this tradition of reading Paul. The reading begins by restoring terms like "law" and "justice" to their basic political significance. So dominant has the apolitical reading of Romans become that it will be necessary to introduce a number of unfamiliar translations into this reading. In part this is necessary to help the reader encounter a text with fresh eyes not blinkered by the tradition. A strategy of defamiliarizing is almost always necessary to allow

a fresh encounter with the text. But in this case it is even more important if the text is to be liberated from its cloying confinement in the cultlike enclave of traditional religious reading. Much of this is simple substitution warranted by the text itself: Judean rather than Jewish, messiah rather than Christ, justice rather than righteousness, fidelity or loyalty rather than faith, generosity or favor rather than grace, Joshua rather than Jesus, and so on. The significance of these changes will become apparent as the reading progresses.

In terms of the reading of Paul's letter itself, it will be necessary to see that Paul is concerned with the most basic issues of political thinking: law and justice. However, Paul is proposing a radical rethinking of the political by insisting that justice should be thought in contrast to law. While agreeing with the tradition of political thought that the basic issue has to do with justice, Paul deviates from that tradition by offering a fundamental critique of the supposition that justice is to be achieved through a legal structuring of society. For Paul, I will argue, the political question of justice is to have a completely new basis: the act of God in the messiah. Thus, a new messianic political thinking is introduced that has radical implications for the way human social history is to be understood, a way that contrasts both with the Mosaic social order and with the Greco-Roman social order, especially that which is made concrete in the Roman imperial order (or disorder).

One of the things most often hidden from view in traditional readings of Paul is his fundamental critique of the Roman Empire and its conceptual underpinnings. Thus, the question of "law" has most often been restricted to the "religious" law of Moses, with little or no attention given to the critique of Rome. As long as Christians have sought to ingratiate themselves with the politically powerful, it has been necessary to deflect or ignore Paul's critique of the Roman Empire. Only in recent times has Paul's opposition to Rome become something that biblical scholars have recognized. Here the Paul and Politics working group under the leadership of Richard Horsley continues to be decisive. The books by Neil Elliott have also greatly deepened this perspective. More recently Brigitte Kahl has argued, in her *Galatians Re-imagined*, that Paul's concern with law must always be read in connection not only with the question of Torah but also in connection with Roman law (5–11).

The emphasis upon Mosaic or Jewish law and corresponding silence about Rome have permitted a deeply anti-Jewish reading of Romans. If one of the most important developments in the reading of Paul, and indeed the New Testament, in recent times has been the growing awareness of Paul's critique of the Roman Empire, another has been the growing recognition that Paul always remained a deeply Jewish (or Judean) thinker. Rescuing Paul and Romans from the anti-Judaism of much of the Christian tradition of reading Romans has been of immense importance in gaining a new understanding of the New Testament, of Paul, and of this text in particular. For, as we shall see, and as Barth already recognized, anti-Judaism is ruled out in principle by Paul in this very letter.

That Paul can be read as one who deals with the most basic issues of political thinking is not a complete innovation in theological reflection. Augustine, whose reading of Romans did so much to depoliticize its themes, nevertheless could also read it as providing basic clues to the contrast between what he called the city of God and the human city. The city or *civitas* was, of course, the basic unit of Latin political thought, as was the *polis* for Greek thought. Augustine recognized that the *civitas* of humanity had in the meantime become not a city-state but an imperial state. And he sought to contrast the human (Roman) empire with the city of God, the divine society inaugurated in Christ. Unfortunately, Augustine found it difficult to think the *social* character of the city of God, at least this side of "heaven," thereby rendering its political significance tenuous at best. Without adopting the specific ways in which Augustine sought to relate these basic political orders, we can nonetheless find a certain common ground in his recognition that in any case what is at stake is a *civitas*, a political ordering of the human world. (Our terms "civics," "civil society," and so on all stem from the Latin *civitas* as a basic political notion or category.)

Certainly Calvin was also aware of some of the political implications of what Paul had been up to in this text, even if its political relevance was fatefully focused on the infamous reference in Romans 13 to the idea that the political order derives from God. But it was at the end of the First World War, with the apparent collapse of Western social order, that Karl Barth in his Romans commentary recognized that what Paul is up to is

articulating a radical critique of any existing sociocultural order. Certainly my reading of Romans owes a good deal to Barth's insight that this text can and should be read as an indictment of the social order (or disorder) of Western civilization. But it is in Latin American liberation theology that the relevance of Paul's argument for an understanding of the basic political structures of the world comes into sharpest focus. Above all I am thinking here of Jose Porfirio Miranda's *Marx and the Bible*, in which Paul is read as offering a fundamental critique of Western civilization—a civilization that entails a political economy that impoverishes the masses while securing the privileges of the few.

Although reading Paul as a thinker of the political is not without precedent in some theological circles and although it may be anchored in certain developments in the historical critical work of contemporary biblical scholars, the most dramatic developments in this way of reading Paul come neither from theologians nor from biblical scholars but from contemporary intellectuals who may be regarded as secular or even atheistic readers of Paul. Contemporary continental thinkers have increasingly turned to the basic questions of the political as they attempt to think the world as a global society dominated by forces that seem to be destructive of human flourishing. Many of them have been deeply influenced by Karl Marx's critique of the political economy of capital and by the ardent desire for the emancipation of the impoverished and the oppressed. In disillusionment with both capitalist globalization and the failures of certain forms of "communism," they have sought to find a way to think of a radically new political economy. In so doing they have increasingly turned to the Bible and especially to Paul, not as "believers" in a doctrine, or practitioners of a cult, or members of an institution that calls itself Christianity, but simply as intellectuals in quest of a radically new way of thinking about human society oriented toward justice. They offer opportunities for reading Paul outside the confinement of specifically religious or even theological commitments. In this they follow a trail blazed at the beginning of the Enlightenment by Hobbes and Spinoza and soon followed by Locke. Although these earlier thinkers saw Paul as a kind of political philosopher, their issue had more to do with the possibility of emancipating the political from the hegemony of religious institutions and from the straitjacket of confessional commitments. Thus, at the early stages of the Enlightenment Paul was of considerable help in the program of

what might be called secularization of the state and was therefore regarded also as a champion of religious liberty.

Even in the nineteenth century, Friedrich Engels, Marx's friend and constant collaborator, had recognized the relevance of Paul for an emancipatory political project. He recognized certain affinities between the project of international socialism and the work of Paul in establishing communities of social justice among the oppressed masses of the Roman Empire. In his *History of Early Christianity*, he writes: "So it was with early Christianity, so it was in the beginning of the socialist movement" (330). He cites with approval the suggestion of the radical biblical scholar Ernst Renan: "If I wanted to give you an idea of the early Christian communities I would tell you to look at a local section of the International Working Men's Association" (318). This even extends to the frustrations of both movements in collecting resources from the masses for the purposes of the movement (318)!

But it was really in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union that the reading of Paul as what we now call a "public intellectual" gained momentum among European intellectuals seeking a new way to think the global political reality that had emerged with the dominance of capitalism and American hegemony.

While what is now called the Great Recession has cast into relief the excesses of global capital, and the bare new beginnings of the transformation of US polity makes clear in retrospect the bankruptcy of a crusade for freedom advanced through preemptive war and torture, the question of a fundamentally new way of thinking about global political arrangements has if anything become only more urgent.

In the rereading of Romans that I pursue in these pages, I will seek to read Romans in dialogue with these "secular" and even nonreligious intellectuals. Of course, my reading is informed by some of the developments in theology and biblical criticism to which I have already referred. But in order to read Paul as a radical thinker of the political, I find it most helpful to call upon those who read Paul outside the religious or even the scholarly ghetto of professional, academic, or ecclesiastical readings. It is the insight of Nietzsche and Heidegger, of Derrida and Nancy, of Badiou and Žižek, of Benjamin and Agamben that I think will most helpfully enable us to see how Paul may be read not simply as a theologian of the

church but as one who is seeking to illuminate the most basic issues of our common life as human beings who dwell together on a planet in peril.

One way of justifying such a rereading of Romans in companionship with contemporary philosophers comes from a story about Paul found in the Acts of the Apostles. There he was met by “some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers,” who we are told “brought him to the Areopagus, saying may we know what this new teaching is which you present?” (17:19). We are then presented with a speech that the author of this text attributes to Paul in which much of what Paul says is fairly straightforward from the perspective of many philosophers of the day. For example: “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands . . . and he made from one every nation of men to live upon the face of the earth . . . that they should seek God in the hope that they might . . . find him” (17:24–27). All of this is in keeping with then-current philosophical common sense, as is the rejection of “idolatry and superstition” of various kinds. Paul then turns to something that might be a bit more controversial: “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent” (17:30). Yet this might also be conformable at least to the philosophical vocation of calling people to leave off superstition as well as vice and to enter upon a life of reason and virtue. But it begins to become gradually more difficult to accept: “Because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in justice”—this too may be made agreeable to the sense that God is a God of justice who will condemn the world for injustice that we will find echoed in some of the historians and poets of this period—“through a man whom he has appointed”—here we are moving further away from the common sense of the matter, even though new emperors were often enough supposed to be the ones who would finally usher in a new era of justice—“of this God has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead”—and it is this last that the cultural common sense of the Greco-Roman world cannot abide (17:31). For good reason, then, the author says that “when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked” (17:32). This seems to good philosophical sense to be what Alain Badiou calls it: a fable. The text continues: “But others said, ‘We will hear you again about this’” (17:32). Despite the puzzlement over some of the seemingly outrageous aspects of this fable, something in Paul’s view is nonetheless sufficiently

attractive to the philosophical mind to justify further inquiry. Indeed, at the end we are told: "But some joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them" (17:34). The Dionysius named here will lend his name to one of the most influential of negative or mystical theologians. Of Damaris we know nothing further, though it was by no means unheard of for women to be found among the philosophers.

This story, whether or not it captures events in Paul's own life, does seem to foreshadow what we know to have been true of some philosophical encounters with early Christianity (the case of Justin Martyr comes to mind). But it also may serve to suggest something of the method that I will employ here as I listen in on contemporary nonreligious philosophers dealing with Paul and with the issues with which Paul seems most concerned. Here the words of Spinoza may offer some encouragement: "None of the Apostles did more philosophizing than Paul" (144).

In reading this text in a fresh way it is still important to make sure that it is this text that one is reading. The guidelines for an appropriate interpretation of this text are still very much as indicated by Origen, who was the first to write a commentary on this letter. The parts of the letter should be understood in relation to the text as a whole. Taking a few favorite verses here and there, tearing them out of their context, and making them into pretexts for some or other point is simply bad reading. In my classes on Romans I encourage students to prepare a copy of Romans that first of all eliminates chapter and verse division to help focus on the overall flow of the argument. This is precisely the way we read Plato or Aristotle as well as Athanasius and Augustine. In my own rereading of Romans I will attempt to keep references to chapters and verses to a minimum, emphasizing instead the basic elements and movements of Paul's argument. Throughout this book the text from Romans is boldface (with occasional lightface insertions aiming at clarifying the translation or text) in order to help the reader identify the passages under discussion.

Moreover, if other texts are to be brought in to clarify this one, then it is important to first consider other texts written by Paul. If a text in Romans is to be understood, it should be understood first from Romans



as a whole document. Then, since it is a text of Paul's, other letters of Paul must initially help us clarify what Paul is up to.

To this we may also add the warning that we will be reading a letter. That means that the text aims at particular readers and takes into account their presumed ways of understanding a text. This indicates something of the difficulty inherent in the reading of this or any other similar text. It is a bit like listening in on one side of a telephone conversation. Some of these difficulties will become evident as we go. They will never be completely soluble. In general it will mean that we will never have complete certainty about the meaning of certain phrases or arguments in the text. That is simply a part of what it means to read the text as the text that it is: written in a time and place, a culture and language, far removed from our own.

The inherent difficulties in reading Pauline texts is something already signaled toward the end of the first century in a text ascribed to the apostle Peter: "So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant twist to their own destruction, as they do the other writings. You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless" (2 Peter 3:15–17).

What is going on here? Note first that the writer knows several letters of Paul and that they are regarded as "writings," which is often a technical term for the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek version of the sacred writings of ancient Israel. Already the texts of Paul are regarded as difficult. And in part this difficulty may relate to the possibility that they may lead people into "lawlessness." Already at the end of the first century, then, Paul's writings were regarded as something like theological dynamite: handle with care. Much of subsequent reading may have attempted to render the text harmless.

A part of the difficulty is already anticipated in Paul's own description of his method of communication. This is how Paul explains his method:

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Judean I became as a Judean, in order to win Judeans. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself

am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Messiah's law), so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel. (1 Corinthians 9:19–23)

We will have to keep this text in mind throughout our reading of Romans. First, because it indicates something odd in Paul's relation to the law: free of the law, but not of divine or messianic law. What can this possibly mean? Already a certain fissure opens up in the idea of law, for divine law seems to be contrasted with the law of Israel, the law of Moses let us say, or the Torah. There is also the question of the weak, to which we will return toward the end of Romans. But for our initial purposes what is most important is the indication of the adaptability of Paul's manner of speaking or writing. He maintains that he shapes what he is saying in accordance with his understanding of the other person or group. And this is not simply a matter of language or of idiom. It also holds for apparently quite radically different religious perspectives. He speaks as a Judean to Judeans. He speaks as a pagan to pagans.

Thus, an important part of the difficulty in reading Paul is that he self-consciously shapes his argument in accordance with the world-view that he supposes to characterize his listeners or readers. Given the paucity of our information about those readers' perspectives, we will be at a considerable disadvantage in reading these texts. This is but one reason for the necessity of multiple readings or interpretations of these documents.

The test of any reading must be what sense it makes of the text it is interpreting. If the reading I offer makes sense of what Paul has actually written (that is, it is rooted clearly in the actual text), situates that text in the social context of the first century, and at the same time helps us make sense of recognizable realities we face in the world of the twenty-first century, then I will be content.

The title of this reading may be briefly explained. The text deals with justice, but a sort of justice that is, as Paul says, "apart from the law," or as I have written, "Outlaw Justice." In explicating this theme, I will depend on some of the insights garnered from Jacques Derrida and other thinkers

of the political at the turn of this century. The way in which justice is to be conceived has to do with the messianic event that redirects human history and society, hence “messianic politics.” Here some of the reflections of Giorgio Agamben are especially helpful in getting at what Paul is up to. The notion of a “theo-political reading of Romans” stems first of all from the beginning of the Enlightenment reading of Paul in Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*, a theme picked up by Jacob Taubes, the great Jewish intellectual who was professor of hermeneutics at the University of Berlin, in his book *The Political Theology of Paul*, which is in conversation with Nietzsche, Freud, Benjamin, and Carl Schmitt.

The body of the letter begins and ends with Paul’s explanation of his impending visit to Rome as well as the reasons for his delay in coming. The beginning of chapter 1 and the end of chapter 15 deal with this theme. All that comes in between may be understood as directed toward his arrival in Rome to provide some assistance to the messianic group there and to seek their assistance for his own messianic mission.

The argument then turns to a discussion of human social or political injustice as represented by what from his perspective are the two major political organizations of humanity: the pagan social order centered in Rome (1:18–2:11) and the Judean social order rooted in Moses (2:17–3:20). The possibility of this critique of injustice is related to the divine impartiality (2:12–16).

To this comprehensive indictment of injustice Paul contrasts the claim of a messianic justice founded not in law (as are the Roman and Judean systems) but in faithfulness with respect to the divine gratuity or unconditional generosity. This is presented first with respect to Abraham (as the father of Judean and pagan) and then, more radically, in relation to Adam—thus, the messianic is the transformation of the Adamic or of humanity as such.

The contrast between a legal social order and one that seeks justice by other means provokes a series of questions regarding the new social order and whether it is not simply an abolition of the claim of justice. To respond, Paul undertakes a series of contrasts (life or death, instruments and slaves of justice or injustice, married women or widows) to suggest what it means to be liberated from the rule of law, which then leads to the most fundamental contrast: between death and the law (7:7–25) or

life and spirit (8:1–17). This spirited liveliness is then expressed in terms of a spirited solidarity that reaches out to extend to creation and that aims at unshakeable confidence in the divine solidarity with humanity and all creation (8:18–39).

This then provides the basis for Paul to address the question of the reliability of the divine promise in history, a subject anticipated all along in his argument. He shows how the divine promise works itself out in history through a series of unanticipated improvisations that respond to, yet overcome, human resistance (chapters 9–11), which then returns him to the assurance that all will be included in the triumph of messianic justice.

But what does this justice look like concretely now, in the emergence of the new messianic social groupings brought into being in the midst of actually existing social injustice? What sort of vanguard social reality can give persuasive evidence of the coming messianic transformation? Paul then comes to what may be the heart and culmination of his argument in addressing the improvisation of justice in these messianic societies (chapters 12–15). Of course, justice must have an improvisational character if it is not to fall back into the sort of legal structure that, in spite of its intentions, can only result in the perpetuation of injustice.

Paul's argument, then, is a complex attempt to persuade his readers, a small group of messiah followers living in the capital of the empire that had executed that messiah, that he can assist them in understanding and living out the extralegal response to the divine claim of justice in the midst of a world whose injustice is all too evident, not least in the execution of the messiah of God.