

Preface

This essay, or thought experiment, is an effort to suggest a certain relationship between the attempt to understand Paul's texts (most especially Romans) and the ways in which Derrida pursues certain themes integral to what I take to be some of Paul's central concerns.

The essay has a particular precipitating occasion—the announcement of a discussion with Derrida organized in connection with the Society of Biblical Literature. This announcement and the ensuing call for papers served as the catalyst for my attempt to put down on paper ideas that have occurred to me as I have taught a seminar on Romans over the last several years, a time when, for reasons unrelated to that seminar, I have also taken up, as a kind of hobby, the reading of Derrida. What I have found again and again is that the latter pastime has shed unexpected light on, as well as confirmation of, some of the things I have been trying to clarify with my students as we have read Romans together. This has been especially true of ideas about justice and law, gift and exchange, duty and debt.

In attempting to think through some of these connections in a more deliberate way, I have not sought to produce a treatise (still less a commentary) on Romans nor an independent treatise on the thought of Derrida. I do not have the competence for the latter, and the former (a rereading of Romans) is a quite different project that this one both interrupts and complements. Instead, I have sought to indicate some of those issues in the attempt to think Paul's argument where a reading of Derrida seems to me to be most helpful. I hope that what I write will be an incitement (and an invitation) to others to take up the question of the relation of deconstruction to the themes and issues of biblical theology generally and to Pauline theology more particularly. At the same time, I hope to offer a case for repositioning the reading of Paul within the context of philosophical rather than exclusively theological (or "historical" or even ecclesial) reflection.

I am not unaware that the procedure here adopted entails a certain violence to the texts both of Derrida and of Paul, for it requires extracting bits and pieces of their respective arguments in order to show points of convergence and illumination. In the case of Derrida, that means that the reader of this text does not have a sense of the extreme care and precaution often taken by Derrida in the patient work of deconstruction. In the case of Paul, this means that the forward movement of his overall argument is regularly halted or even reversed in order to make the point that his concern is precisely with the question of justice. I hope, however, that the violence of this reading is to a certain degree mitigated by its attempt to undo the greater violence that has come from the supposition that neither author is really concerned with the question of justice.

Because this work would not have been undertaken at this point without the catalyst of SBL discussions, I must express my gratitude to those who organized these sessions concerned with deconstruction and biblical interpretation, especially Yvonne Sherwood. An early version of Chapter 4 of this book was published in the volume that resulted from those discussions, *Derrida's Bible*, edited by Yvonne Sherwood (London: Palgrave Press, 2004).

Of course I could not have thought of pursuing this project had I not already been engaged in the reading of Romans. That I have wrestled with Paul fruitfully (and otherwise) for many years I owe to the tutelage and friendship of Hendrik Boers. For more than a third of a century, our friendship has been mediated by way of conversations about Paul. The reading of Paul requires a context, and this has been provided first by the Seminario Metodista de Mexico, where I first ventured to teach Romans, and then, for the last several years, by the Chicago Theological Seminary. I am grateful to the friends and students who have been a constant source of inspiration and admonition in this task.

The reading of Derrida also began in the context of friendship, first many years ago with Jim Creech and Peggy Kamuf. It resumed after a too-long hiatus under the prodding of my colleagues at the Chicago Theological Seminary, especially BoMyung Seo, Benny Tat-siong Liew, Kunitoshi Sakai, and Virgil (Bill) Brower. I am especially grateful to those who were able to read the manuscript at early stages of its preparation and made important encouraging as well as cautionary interventions. Hendrikus Boers and Peggy Kamuf read the first chapters, and Benny Tat-siong Liew and Virgil Brower read an early version of the entire book. Their insightful

comments have provoked me to greater clarity. Norris Pope, Angie Michaelis, and Tim Roberts of Stanford University Press have been unfailingly helpful and cheerful in the long process of seeing this project through to publication. I am also grateful to Wil Brant and Adam Kotsko for their assistance in the preparation of the manuscript for publication. Without the generous assistance of Kunitoshi Sakai it would have been impossible to keep track of the many projects in which I am involved, and this work would have been greatly delayed. And without the forbearance of Ronna Case, the obsessional neurosis that any book project involves would have been unthinkable.