

THE THEOLOGY OF  
PAUL'S LETTER TO  
THE ROMANS

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## CHAPTER 6

### *To the Romans a Roman? The rhetoric of Romans as a model for preaching the Gospel in Rome*

#### ROMANS AS A DOCUMENT OF MISSIOLOGY AND THE IDEA OF CONTEXTUALISATION

In the last decades the exegesis of Romans has moved away from a doctrinal interpretation, which took Paul's teaching as timeless truth without asking to whom and for what he was writing. Instead, attention has focused on the letter's purpose(s) in the context of Paul's missionary work. Some commentators have specified this in *apologetic* terms: large portions of the letter can be read as a defence of the Gospel which Paul has been proclaiming in previous years. He had met opposition against his course of receiving Gentiles into the Church without requiring them to accept Jewish ritual traditions. In his letter to the churches of Galatia, he had been fighting fiercely against agitators who tried to win over Gentile-Christians as converts to Judaism. The Letter to the Romans has much in common with the Letter to the Galatians. It is therefore reasonable to assume that in Romans Paul is continuing this discussion about the principles of evangelism among people of non-Jewish origin. His impending visit to Jerusalem may have increased the urgency of additional arguments for his case. Surely this is one of the reasons why we find so much reflection on 'Jews and Greeks' in the Letter to the Romans.

On the other hand, some scholars have cautioned us against neglecting the real addressees of the letter. In Rom. 15 the visit to Jerusalem is mentioned because it is the last obligation which Paul feels he must fulfil before his visit to Rome, which he had planned and awaited for so many years. Both in chapter 1 and in chapter 15 Paul emphasises his heartfelt desire to come to Rome in order to

serve the believers there. Moreover, he hopes to make Rome his starting-point for a new and adventurous outreach to the West. Therefore, it is necessary to read the letter more in the context of the *future* which Paul envisages than in the context of memories of past conflicts. While there is some truth in reading Romans as Paul's 'testament' (many others have written down their will in situations of crisis only to continue their journey for a couple of years!), there is *more* truth in understanding Romans as a manifesto declaring the principles of missionary preaching which Paul intends to apply when coming to Rome. To convince the Roman believers of these principles was all the more important for Paul because he hoped to receive their support for his outreach towards Spain, the Western 'end of the world' according to the ancient Mediterranean world view.

Those who emphasise this background of the letter usually think in terms of the necessity for Paul to appeal to common traditions of Early Christianity as the basis of agreement and harmony. However, only relatively few examples of this strategy can be identified with certainty (see chapter 5). They are scattered within the large body of this letter and contribute little to the distinctive features of Romans if compared with other Pauline letters. What is more characteristic of Romans is the amount of new ideas in Paul's argument – be it in his use of Scripture (as in chapters 4 and 9–11) or in his appeal to human experience (as in chapter 7). This innovative force of the letter's content should be related to the apostle's pressing forward to new horizons of his missionary work – in Rome and beyond, in the more Romanised parts of the empire.

Certain peculiarities of Romans suggest a reflection along the lines of modern concepts of mission that have been developed in connection with the ecumenical movement. Parallel to the spread of political independence among former colonies, many churches that had been founded and shaped by European or North American missionaries discovered that they had been estranged from their national culture or tribal traditions. They felt the need of an 'indigenous theology' resulting from an encounter between the Biblical message and those cultural traditions. While ultimately this means a task to be performed by the recipients themselves, the essential insight implies a challenge to missionaries to go as far as they can

towards a dialogue with the culture of the peoples and places of their respective mission fields. The most widespread catchword for this missionary strategy is *contextualisation*. Can it be applied to Early Christian missionary activities?

Yes and no! Or rather ‘No and yes’? As far as the New Testament is concerned, all our documents are written in Greek and come from the Mediterranean world, politically from within the Roman empire, culturally from regions that had been more or less Hellenised for three hundred years.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there was considerable cultural variety, especially in connection with the variety of traditional languages as a vehicle of regional traditions. As early as in the original Church of Jerusalem, we find ‘Hebrews’ alongside ‘Hellenists’ (Greek-speaking Jews), and Stephen’s skilful use of Old Testament traditions may reflect a ‘wisdom’ that had been cultivated more in Alexandria than in Jerusalem (see Acts 6:5, 10; 7:2–53). As for Paul, he seems to have been familiar with both milieus: he can proudly call himself a ‘Hebrew (born) from Hebrews’ (whose command of the ‘Hebrew’ = Aramaic language is attested by Acts 21:40; 22:2), but he also debates with Hellenists (see Acts 9:29) and writes letters in a style that is well above the colloquial Greek of his day. Was he not an ideal candidate for the task of building bridges across cultural barriers in the service of the Gospel?

But was it his concern? Was he conscious of the problems of cross-cultural communication? Was he not convinced that one Gospel was enough for the whole world, regardless of differences of nationality, gender, and social status (see Rom. 3:29–30; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28)? True. And yet there is one clear testimony of Paul’s accommodating his missionary strategy to the respective character of the target groups of his witness. In 1 Cor. 9:20–22 he writes:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am

<sup>1</sup> Contrary to theories from the early twentieth century, this includes the Jewish homeland; see Martin Hengel in collaboration with Christoph Marksches, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (London: SCM Press/Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989).

under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

One might object that the difference between Jews living according to the Law and Gentiles (not knowing this Law, see Rom. 2:14) is a religious or theological one and not a cultural one. But note that this contrast is only the beginning and that Paul goes on to generalise the principle of his conduct ('all things to all men . . . by all possible means'). That Paul could apply this principle to very special local settings was the conviction of at least one author, who must have known more of Paul than all we epigones:<sup>2</sup> In Acts 17:22–31 Luke depicts Paul as answering brilliantly to the curiosity of some Athenian 'philosophers', alluding to some of their intellectual traditions and to their contempt of popular religion without denying essentials of the Biblical message (which in fact turned out as stumbling-blocks at least to parts of the audience). This story shows that contextualisation as a term is a modern invention, but that the idea behind it could be conceived of already by some Early Christians. Can it account for certain peculiar features of Paul's Letter to the Romans? A comparison between several traits of Romans and secular sources on contemporary Roman culture and ideology yields some results which I consider to be noteworthy.<sup>3</sup>

#### PEACE IN ROMANS AND IN ROMAN PROPAGANDA AND RELIGION

In chapter 4 I had described the prominent place of the idea of peace (with God and in human relations) in various parts of the Letter to the Romans. This emphasis is paralleled by the frequency and importance of this topic in Roman sources, both literary and

<sup>2</sup> Of course, I know of colleagues who are confident that they *understand* Paul better than Luke did. But that cannot be discussed here. It does not affect the lesson to be learned from the example.

<sup>3</sup> The topic of this chapter has been anticipated more than a hundred years ago in a short contribution to the *Expository Times* which drew attention to elements of Roman law as the background of several passages of Romans; see Edward Hicks, 'A Roman to Romans', *ET* 5 (1893/94), 565–567; and 6 (1894/95), 93–94. Since then there has been very little reflection along this line (as far as I know).



epigraphic ones (inscriptions and coins).<sup>4</sup> To be more precise, the popularity of the idea of peace was the result of the career of Augustus and of the establishment of the principate after decades of civil unrest and civil war. The most perspicuous expression of this background was the erection of an altar for the veneration of the ‘Peace of Augustus’ (*ara pacis augustae*), dedicated in the year 9 BCE. But already Caesar had been praised as ‘peacemaker’ in the funeral oration of Mark Antony,<sup>5</sup> perhaps an echo of coins with *pax* inscriptions minted by Caesar towards the end of his life. The theme was amply developed by poets of the Augustan age such as Ovid,<sup>6</sup> Tibullus,<sup>7</sup> and Virgil.<sup>8</sup>

What is less known, this praise of the ‘Roman peace’, established and guarded by the Julio-Claudian dynasty, had a second heyday in the years when Paul wrote to the Romans. Late in the year AD 54 a promising young ruler named Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus succeeded his stepfather (Claudius), who had become rather unpopular in the course of his reign. At the time of his access to power Nero was hardly 17 years old, and within a year the people understood that this new ruler had no ambition to achieve military victories. Instead he showed himself eager to promote cultural events and to please the public himself with poetry and other performances as an artist. Unfortunately, in his attempt to appear as the greatest pop-star of his age, he overestimated his own talent. But initially he was greeted by the public with great enthusiasm. Among his predecessors, he preferred Augustus as the example he promised to follow.<sup>9</sup> We have several literary works in which the final consummation of peace on earth is ascribed to him or expected from him. A poet from Sicily named Calpurnius sings:<sup>10</sup>

The unholy War-Goddess [Bellona] shall yield and have her vanquished hands bound behind her back, and, stripped of weapons, turn her furious teeth into her own entrails; upon herself shall she wage civil wars which

<sup>4</sup> See Stefan Weinstock, ‘Pax and the “Ara pacis”’, *JRS* 50 (1960), 44–58, and plates V–IX.

<sup>5</sup> See Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 44:49, 2. <sup>6</sup> See *Fasti* I 711–12.

<sup>7</sup> See *Elegies*, I 10:69–70. <sup>8</sup> See his famous fourth eclogue and in *Aen.* 6:851–853.

<sup>9</sup> See Weinstock, ‘Pax and the “Ara pacis”’, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Lines from *Eclogue*, 1:46–67, abridged and translated by Neil Elliott, ‘Romans 13:1–7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda’, in *Paul and Empire. Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburgh, 1997), 184–204, 202.

of late she spread o'er all the world . . . Fair peace shall come, fair not in visage alone . . . Clemency has commanded every vice<sup>11</sup> that wears the disguise of peace to betake itself afar: she has broken every maddened sword-blade . . . Peace in her fullness shall come; knowing not the drawn sword, she shall renew once more the reign of Saturn<sup>12</sup> in Latium, once more the reign of Numa who first taught the tasks of peace to armies that rejoiced in slaughter.

Similarly an anonymous poet of the same time, whose verses have been discovered in the library of the Swiss monastery of Einsiedeln, wrote (*Eclogue 2*: 25–31):

We reap with no sword, nor do towns in fast-closed walls prepare unutterable war: there is not any woman who . . . gives birth to an enemy. Unarmed our youth can dig the fields, and the boy, trained to the slow-moving plow, marvels at the sword hanging in the abode of his fathers.<sup>13</sup>

In his fourth eclogue, lines 142–146, Calpurnius overtly ascribes the achievement of this peace to Nero and shows himself convinced that he must be one of the gods, disguised as a man (possibly Jupiter himself!). In a similar vein Seneca's nephew, Lucanus, composed an introduction to his epic on the civil war in which he anticipates the deification of Nero in connection with the universal end of all wars.<sup>14</sup>

If Paul shows a predilection for the language of peace (and harmony) in his Letter to the Romans (and not in other letters), the most natural explanation is that he was consciously alluding to this ideology. That does not mean that he was willing to subscribe to the claim that peace on earth was the gift of the rulers of the empire. Far from that, his verdict on them is probably implied in his quotation from Isa. 59:8 in Rom. 3:17: 'They do not know the way of peace.' (In the tradition of Biblical language this means not only ignorance but lack of concern and experience.) What made this phraseology of peace attractive for Paul's interpretation of the Gospel was its obvious appeal to the public, which indicated a deep longing for

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps an allusion to the tract *De clementia* which Nero's tutor Seneca dedicated to him shortly after his enthronement.

<sup>12</sup> That is the golden age. <sup>13</sup> Translation see n. 10.

<sup>14</sup> See *Pharsalia*, I: 44–47 and 60–62.

peace among ordinary people. After all, there had been too much bloodshed in the last decades of the republic and during the rise of Octavian/Augustus to power. On the other hand, to emphasise the peace dimension of the Gospel was in no wise misleading. Paul had the backing of his favourite prophet (Isaiah) for this choice (see Isa. 52:7, quoted but abridged in Rom. 10:15 and alluded to in Acts 10:36 and Eph. 2:17).

But what about peace *with God* or *reconciliation* with Him? Of course, this terminology for the centre of his message used in Rom. 5:1, 10, 11 has no parallels in the imperial propaganda. But it does answer to a deep concern of traditional Roman religion. While Greek philosophy increasingly repudiated the idea that gods are subject to moods and that men must fear their wrath, the concern for peace with the gods (*pax deorum* or *pax deum*) was a vital issue for conservative Romans.<sup>15</sup> Disasters of their history were interpreted as divine judgements and called for efforts to implore the peace with the gods.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Paul is taking advantage of a happy coincidence when he introduces the Gospel which he intends to preach in Rome as focusing on the problem of God's rightful wrath (see Rom. 1:18) which is overcome by Christ's atoning death (see Rom. 5:9–11) in order to bestow peace with God on all believers through our Lord Jesus Christ (see Rom. 5:1). While the apostle does not hesitate to denounce pagan polytheism and worship of creatures (certainly including rulers) instead of the creator, he does not despise points of contact which can serve as bridges for future converts on their way to faith in Christ.

To sum up, both the interpretation of the Gospel and the emphasis on peace and harmony in ethical passages of Romans can be understood as a conscious tribute to values of the cultural context of the addressees. In introducing himself to the Roman Christians, Paul is not only displaying his 'orthodoxy' in terms of Early Christian convictions and his faithfulness to the heritage of the Old Testament, but also his creative capacities in encountering new horizons of missionary endeavours.

<sup>15</sup> Certainly not for rationalists such as Lucretius; see his *De rerum natura* V 1224–1232.

<sup>16</sup> See Livy, *Ab urbe condita* III 5:17; 7:7; 8:1.

RIGHTEOUSNESS (OR, JUSTICE) AS ROMAN BENEFIT AND  
AS GOD'S ACTIVITY, GIFT, AND CALLING

Ever since Martin Luther and his fellow-reformers, the interpretation of Paul's Letter to the Romans has emphasised the doctrine of justification and of God's saving righteousness as its major concern. To include this topic in this chapter on *distinctive* ideas of Romans may astonish those who still believe that Paul is teaching this doctrine in every letter. But it also risks objections from those who know that justification is a common topic of Romans and Galatians! While the heat of the conflict in the earlier letter marks a difference between Galatians and Romans,<sup>17</sup> the discussion about the Law and circumcision is continued, and some scriptural arguments from Galatians return in Romans, though modified. Nevertheless, a look at word statistics will teach us that the topic of righteousness or justice plays a much greater role in Romans than in Galatians. As a matter of fact, it is only the verb *dikaioo* which links both letters (used 15 times in Romans and 8 times in Galatians). As for the noun *dikaioosyne* the frequency leaps from 7 in Galatians to 34 in Romans; for the adjective *dikaios* from 1 to 7; and five additional words from this family do not occur in Galatians but only in Romans (*dikaionoma* 3 times, *dikaiosis* twice, and *dikaioikrisia* once, *adikia* 7 times and *adikos* once). The relative length of Romans cannot sufficiently explain these numbers. The evidence points to a palpable shift of perspective.

This impression is strengthened when we consider the places where the pertinent words appear in the structure of the letter. Already the so-called motto or proposition of the letter contains both the noun and the adjective: 'In the gospel God's righteousness is revealed . . . the righteous will live by faith' (1:17). This is the message which Paul has to preach to Greeks and non-Greeks (1:14), and which he is not ashamed of because it offers salvation to Jews and non-Jews (1:16). It is the message he hopes to proclaim in Rome in the near future (1:15), so we may suspect that he is clothing it

<sup>17</sup> After all, Paul could speak to the Galatians as a father while he was a stranger to most of the believers in Rome.

in words which he intends to use when he has arrived there. Then follow some instances where the need of salvation is shown to be caused by human unrighteousness (see Rom. 1:18, 29; 2:8; 3:5). When the apostle returns to the positive content of the Gospel there is again a cluster of words from this root (see 3:21–26, 28, 30). The same is true of Romans 9:30 – 10:10. All these texts trace the (gracious) justification of believers back to the righteousness of God. And all of them emphasise the *universal* scope of this saving activity of God in Christ.

Now let us for a moment deprive this vocabulary of its specific theological meaning but keep the basic structure (righteousness/justice for the whole world). What we get is another central idea of Roman pride and propaganda. The tradition of associating Roman culture with righteousness is even older than the ideology of peace in that it dates back to the times of the Roman republic. And, contrary to the case with peace, there is evidence that Paul even shared this high esteem of the Roman legal institutions and the spirit behind them. In his plea for loyalty to the existing political order (i.e., to Roman dominance over the Mediterranean world) in Rom. 13:1–7, he argues not only on a theological level (teaching that world history is under God's control so that the ruling powers have to be accepted, see vv. 1–2) but also on a pragmatic level (submission is safer because of the punitive power of the state, and active cooperation is even more promising in view of possible rewards, see vv. 3–5). To underline this reference to jurisdiction, Paul reminds the readers that this is also the legitimate reason for their paying taxes (v. 6).<sup>18</sup> More precisely, he is speaking of *tributes* (*phoroi*) which had to be paid by the members of subdued nations, not by Roman citizens.<sup>19</sup> This is an echo of a widespread pattern of argument used by Roman officials in order to praise the benefits

<sup>18</sup> The *gar* (for) at the beginning of the sentence shows that this verse is not yet an exhortation to pay taxes (such as follows in v. 7), but a statement of facts which confirm the opinion voiced in v. 5.

<sup>19</sup> That is why Paul, as a Roman citizen, says 'you' and not 'we' in this statement. This is the only hint at his civil status in his letters, and a rather tacit one. If the difference between slaves and free citizens had become irrelevant in Paul's eyes (see Gal. 3:28), then his Roman citizenship deserved no attention in his correspondence with fellow believers. The exception in Rom. 13 is due to the topic 'tribute'.

of Roman dominance and to justify the material cost of accepting the Roman rule.<sup>20</sup> Apparently Paul has no objections to admitting at least a kernel of truth in this claim, and we in turn should be rather slow to criticise him in this respect: is not the heritage of Roman law in our legal traditions in fact the most valuable part of the legacy of the Roman culture?

Of course, this political application of the Roman claim to an extraordinary talent for justice is not the root of the tradition. It could even be questioned by self-critical Romans as Tacitus does by quoting a certain Calgacus, leader of a Britannic rebellion against Roman dominance in AD 83.<sup>21</sup> On a philosophical level, the idea of righteousness is an essential part of the idea of humanism (*humanitas*) which was coined by the Romans, not yet the Greeks.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, it is claimed as a notable part of the national character of the Romans. While Cicero quotes this conviction ironically in order to criticise a questionable economic policy of the Roman state,<sup>23</sup> Valerius Maximus, in the thirties of the first century, asserts that ‘among all nations our society is the outstanding and clearest example’ of righteousness.<sup>24</sup> According to Cicero, righteousness, together with peacefulness, was part of the legacy of the legendary Roman King Numa Pompilius.<sup>25</sup>

In view of this well-attested, widespread, and long-lived tradition, the peculiar emphasis on righteousness in Paul’s Letter to the Romans cannot be haphazard. The apostle must have been blind and deaf if he had not noticed the popularity and importance of the idea of righteousness in Roman circles (which he certainly had met

<sup>20</sup> See Cicero, *Ad Quintum fratrem* I 1:34–35; Velleius Paterculus, *Hist. Rom.* II 117:3; Tacitus, *Hist* IV 73–74; Aelius Aristides, *Or.* XXVI (*On Rome*) 67; Cassius Dio, *Hist. Rom.* LII 29; Orosius, *Hist. Adv. Pag.* V 1:10–12.

<sup>21</sup> See Tacitus, *Agricola* 31:1–2: *Works, Vol. I, Agricola*, trans. M. Hutton, rev. R. M. Ogilvie (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970): ‘Our goods and chattels go for tribute; our lands and harvests in requisitions of grain; life and limb themselves are worn out in making roads through marsh and forest to the accompaniment of gibes and blows. Slaves born to slavery are sold once and for all and are fed by their masters free of cost; but Britain pays a daily price for her own enslavement, and feeds the slavers, . . .’

<sup>22</sup> See Cicero, *De legibus* I 10:28 (Human beings are ‘born for righteousness’) and *De finibus bonorum et malorum* V 22:65.

<sup>23</sup> See *De re publica* III 9:16.      <sup>24</sup> See *Facta et dicta memorabilia* 6:5.

<sup>25</sup> See *De re publica* I 14:26. A later Christian writer of antiquity, Minucius Felix (*Octavius* 25:1–2), confronts this ‘very famous and noble Roman righteousness’ with the sagas about crimes and vices in the very cradle of the new-born Roman state.

in cities like Philippi, Ephesus, and above all Corinth). To make such ample use of the pertinent vocabulary exactly in his letter to Rome must have been a conscious decision resulting from homiletic (or hermeneutic) reflection. Again, as with the topic of peace, this strategy will have implied a dialectical approach. Paul could wholeheartedly join hands with the moralists who proclaimed the ethical principle of righteousness (see Rom. 6:13, 16, 19–20; 14:17). At the same time, he was certainly determined to question the pride of Roman society and to confront it with the gap between theory and practice (see 1:18–32; 13:12–13). Especially he would have preached the Living God as the only personification of *true* righteousness, and the Gospel as the message of righteousness for all the world. In fact, it sounds like an echo of the Letter to the Romans when in the late first century 'letter of Clement' (in reality a letter of the church of Rome to the church of Corinth) we read that Paul, 'having been a herald in the East and in the West . . . taught righteousness to the whole world'.<sup>26</sup>

But what about the risk of misunderstanding the Christian message because of the lack of congruence between the semantics of *dikaiosisyne* in the Biblical tradition and in secular philosophical traditions?<sup>27</sup> Was there any chance to convey the affinity between righteousness and mercy in the Old Testament (which was at the basis of Paul's concept of the 'righteousness of God') to a Roman audience? No doubt the Greek tradition of understanding righteousness as giving everyone his due (reward or *punishment*) could create serious obstacles for the communication of Paul's message of justification.<sup>28</sup> However, there is evidence of remarkable differences between Greek and Roman concepts of righteousness. In *De republica* III 7:10–11 Cicero explicitly criticises 'the majority of philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle' for their definition of righteousness which virtually reduces this virtue to a quality of judges and rulers instead of attributing it (in principle) to all human

<sup>26</sup> See 1 Clem. 5:7. The same letter may also have been influenced by Paul's emphasis in Romans on peace and harmony. Its main objective is to help the Christians of Corinth to overcome tensions and strife in their ranks. See 1 Clem. 20:10–11; 60:4; 61:1; 62:2; 63:2; 65:1 especially with Rom. 16:17–20.

<sup>27</sup> See above in ch. 4, pp. 53–54.

<sup>28</sup> Even Martin Luther had to wrestle with this problem; see below pp. 154–155.

beings irrespective of social class. In III 15:24 he goes on to ascribe to 'righteousness' the connotations of 'forbearance with everybody and a concern for the welfare of the human race'.<sup>29</sup> Another aspect of the Roman understanding of righteousness which lent a hand to Paul's purposes was its association with the important Roman ideal of *faithfulness* (*fides*, translated by *pistis* in Greek texts but not identical in its meaning<sup>30</sup>). Cicero (in *De officiis* I 7:23) could write: 'The basis of righteousness is faithfulness (*fundamentum autem est iustitiae fides*)' – a sentence which Paul could have quoted with approval while giving it a fresh meaning!

This is not the only example of Latin texts with a conjunction of terms which Paul could use as points of contact for the communication of the Gospel. In *Rep.* III 17:27 Cicero praises a man of 'highest *righteousness*, singular *faithfulness*' (*summa iustitia, singulari fide*). Another significant combination is between *peace and justice* as in verses of Ovid which glorify the merits of Augustus (*Metam.* XV 832–833). According to Seneca (*De clementia* III 17:8 (or I 19:8)) ideal conditions under a good ruler include justice and peace – benefits which even the provinces enjoy if only they accept their Roman overlords (see Tacitus, *Hist.* IV 74:1). There are even instances where peace, righteousness, and faithfulness occur together. According to Petronius (famous for his satirical *Banquet of Trimalchio*), the three goddesses *Pax*, *Fides*, and *Iustitia* fled when the civil war between Caesar and Pompey began (see *Sat.* 124: 247–253). A panegyric of Velleius Paterculus on Tiberius makes faithfulness and righteousness return and discord flee under the reign of this monarch (see *Hist. Rom.* II 126:2). Is it by chance that one of the rare instances with 'the kingdom of God' in Paul's letters – Rom. 14:17 – speaks of 'righteousness, peace and joy' as its essence?

#### LIMITS OF THE LAW AS OF LAWS IN GENERAL

A striking phenomenon which cannot easily be explained from Jewish traditions is the series of negative verdicts on the Law of Moses or on laws in general in several chapters of Romans. Some

<sup>29</sup> *'parcere omnibus, consulere generi hominum'*.

<sup>30</sup> In one place at least – Rom. 14:23 – Paul seems to use *pistis* in the sense of the Roman 'good faith' (= 'honest intention' or 'good conscience').



of these statements are anticipated already in Galatians, but in a more casual way and less unequivocally, so that it is legitimate to discuss them in this chapter on characteristic features of Romans. The points in question are the following:

(a) Contrary to Jewish theories about a pre-existence of the Law, Paul insists on the plain meaning of the Old Testament tradition according to which the Law was given to Moses at Mount Sinai after the exodus from Egypt – centuries after the beginnings of God's history with a chosen family, the ancestors of the people of Israel (see Gal. 3:17; Rom. 5:13–14, 20). To Paul (and his contemporaries), this late date of the legislation through Moses is no mere matter of chronology, since in antiquity chronological priority as a rule suggested superiority.<sup>31</sup> The lesson that Paul wants to bring home to his audience was that the *promises* given to Abraham and his descendants (including his spiritual 'descendants', the imitators of his faith) were of far greater importance than the requirements of the Law.

(b) According to Rom. 3:19–20 and 4:15, the essential function of laws is to reveal, condemn, and punish transgressions. This is also the meaning of the phrase 'curse of the Law' in Gal. 3:13 – which is sometimes misunderstood as if it declared the Law to *be* a curse<sup>32</sup> – and of Gal. 3:19. Although this function of laws (and of the Law) is necessary and politically positive, it speaks strongly against assigning too much weight to observance of the Law in the context of salvation.

(c) In a number of passages in Romans Paul goes a step further in constructing a still more negative connection between the Law and sin. According to Rom. 5:20, the later addition (or should we translate 'intrusion'?) of the Law had the *aim* of increasing or multiplying transgressions! The same idea is hinted at in Rom. 4:15; 6:14; and 7:5–6 (possibly already in Gal. 3:19). Then it is explicitly developed in Rom. 7:7–11:

I would not have known what sin was except through the Law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the Law had not said 'Do not covet.' But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment,

<sup>31</sup> This is the main reason for all claims of pre-existence; see John 1:15.

<sup>32</sup> For this clarification see Gal. 3:10.

produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to serve life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.<sup>33</sup>

To be sure, this passage contains some striking parallels to the story of the Fall in Gen. 3. But to read this story as an anticipation of the impact of the Law on human behaviour must have sounded outrageous to Jewish ears – and that may be one reason why Paul does not explicitly quote or refer to Gen. 3. But what else could have secured the plausibility of his story? Could the readers of Romans follow the argument of the apostle in this passage? What was strange and shocking for readers with a Jewish background may have been familiar to people brought up in and surrounded by a pagan environment. Let us consider these three stratagems to downgrade the Law from a Roman perspective:

(a) As for the later date of the Law, we find the idea of a ‘Golden Age’ without laws in several sources. Seneca (*Letters* XIV 90:6) ascribes it to the stoic philosopher Poseidonios. Its popularity in Rome is attested by a passage in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (I 89–92) and (later) by Tacitus (*Ann.* 3:26) in a critical comment on the flood of new laws promulgated under Tiberius (possibly an echo of contemporary discussions).

(b) That laws must include regulations for the punishment of transgressors is presupposed already by Plato (see in his *Laws* IX 853c; 854c.d; 870e; 871a). Therefore Philo felt obliged to give an explanation of the fact that the decalogue does not end with such penal laws. Roman authors shared this definition of ‘law’ as imposing sanctions on transgressors (see Cicero, *Rep.* III 11:18 and Seneca, *Letters* XV 94:38).

(c) The striking idea of Paul that the Law not only fails but that specific commandments are likely to induce people to transgress them is paralleled in writings of Cicero and Seneca. In a speech in court (*Pro M. Tullio* 9), Cicero claims that murder had been very rare in the times of the ancestors. That is why they had no

<sup>33</sup> Translation from the New International Version, slightly modified.

law against bandits. In his opinion, to enact a law against a crime which did not yet exist could have encouraged people to commit it.<sup>34</sup> More important, because published shortly before Paul's Letter to the Romans, is a passage in Seneca's writing *De clementia* (I 23:1) which he wrote as an instruction and (hopeful) programme for his former pupil, now young emperor, Nero. Seneca mentions the frequency of capital punishment for patricide under Claudius and goes on to say: 'As long as there had been no law against this crime, only very few children dared to commit it . . . patricide started with the law, and the penalty showed them the crime.' Apart from these texts from juridical contexts, there is ample evidence from Roman sources which teaches that the psychological analysis contained in Rom. 7:7–11 was in no wise new to the readers of Romans. It had been propagated by Publilius Syrus, a very popular actor and writer of proverbs of the first century BCE who was widely read in late antiquity and the Middle Ages.<sup>35</sup> It is also well attested in the erotic poems of Ovid. The closest parallels to Rom. 7:7–11 are in his *Amores* III poem 4:9, 11, 17, 25, 31: 'Stop arousing vices by forbidding . . .'.<sup>36</sup> According to Tacitus (*Ann.* XIII 12:2; 13:1), it was this principle which made a woman named Acne more attractive for Nero than his legitimate wife, Octavia, and which frustrated the reproaches of Nero's mother against this liaison.

To round out the picture, it is worth mentioning in this context that the continuation in Rom. 7, especially vv. 15–20, recalls the mythical figure of Medea, who killed her sons from Jason because he had deserted her. According to Euripides, she knew that she would commit a terrible crime but could not resist her violent feelings.<sup>37</sup> The popularity of this story in Rome is attested by the fact that both Ovid and Seneca produced Latin versions of the play. The inner conflict before the bloody act had been put in paintings by artists (e.g., in Pompeii and Herculaneum). This leads us to the next topic of our soundings in the Roman context of the Letter to the Romans.

<sup>34</sup> A similar argument is found in Cicero's speech *Pro domo sua*, 49:127.

<sup>35</sup> See the saying in his *Sententiae* N 17: 'Desire loves nothing more than what is forbidden.'

<sup>36</sup> See also *ibid.* II 19:3. <sup>37</sup> See Euripides, *Medea* 1077b–1080.

## THE POWER AND UNIVERSALITY OF SIN

Romans 7 is only the climax of a line of argument which runs through the early chapters of this letter and which betrays what may be labelled as Paul's ethical (or anthropological) *pessimism*. He is not content with referring to the fact that sins occur from time to time and then forgiveness is needed (and offered by God). His message of *universal* salvation in Christ implied that the threat was as universal as the comfort (or in the favourite terms of the 'new perspective on Paul': the 'plight' as universal as the 'solution'). The apostle argues this case in Rom. 1:18–3:20, beginning with a sombre picture of mankind's religious failure and subsequent moral decline – a picture that he could paint with the colours of traditional Jewish polemics against the pagan world (see 1:18–32). But then he goes on to question the assumed superiority of Jews who overestimated their knowledge of God's will as revealed in the Law and overlooked their shortcomings in living according to the Law. While in Rom. 2:17–29 this is no general reproach against all Jews, the quotations from Scripture which follow in 3:9–19 are adduced as proof that Jews are no less sinners than pagans. The conclusion is drawn in 3:22–23: 'There is not difference [i.e., between Jews and Gentiles], for all have sinned and fail to give glory to God.' At this point of the argument, this insight has been derived from Scripture. In Rom. 7 it will be confirmed by experience. The best that the Law can achieve is to convince our minds; but it cannot really control our actions which are ruled by irrational forces.

We are used to thinking that this strong emphasis on human sinfulness is beyond the natural capacities of human introspection, that it has to be revealed and to be believed. On the exegetical level we have been taught that Paul himself had never lived the conflict which he describes in Rom. 7, but that this chapter is his analysis of human existence from a post-conversion viewpoint. Therefore, it comes as a surprise that we can find the same harsh verdicts on human sinfulness as in Romans in writings of Seneca:

We all have sinned [*peccavimus omnes*], some more, some less, some with determination, some by accident or induced by the depravity of others. Some of us had good intentions but lacked the firmness to stick to them

and lost their innocence against their will and resistance.<sup>38</sup> And we did not only fail in the past but will continue to do so until the end of our lives. (*De clementia* I 6:3)

Not one will be found who can absolve himself, though everybody calls himself innocent – in view of what witnesses can prove, not what conscience knows. (*De ira* I 14:3)

If we want to judge everything justly, we must start by persuading ourselves that nobody of us is without guilt . . . Who is it who can declare himself innocent with regard to all laws? And even if that be the case – how poor is such an innocence: to be good according to the law! The field of duties is much larger than the requirement of law! . . . But we cannot even guarantee our compliance with this artificial definition of innocence: some things we performed, some we planned, some we wished, some we indulged; at times we are innocent because something did not work. (*Ibid.* II 28:1–3)

Human nature produces deceitful characters, ungrateful ones, covetous ones, impious ones. When you have to judge the behaviour of one individual, consider what is common. (*Ibid.* II 31:5)

Even the most prudent fail. (*Ibid.* III 25:2)

So let us come to an end [sc. after a long series of lamentations] lest guilt be attached to our century. Our ancestors deplored this, we deplore it and our posterity will deplore it: that morality has been destroyed, iniquity reigns, human affairs become worse and worse . . . It is always the same what we have to proclaim about ourselves; we are wicked, we have been wicked and, I do not like to add: we shall be wicked. (*De beneficiis* I 10:1, 3)

You are wrong, my dear Lucilius, if you think that extravagance and neglect of good manners and whatever everybody blames his times for are a vice of our century. This is not a matter of times but of men: no generation has been void of guilt. (*Ep. Mor.* XVI 97:1)

Now why this long litany? To show that these are not casual remarks but expressions of a real concern of the philosopher, products of anthropological reflection. And since Seneca had been more a collector than an inventor of ideas, we can read his writings as witnesses of the kind of thinking that was ‘in the air’ among educated

<sup>38</sup> See Rom. 7:14–23.

people of Rome in the middle of the first century. Without assuming that Paul had read Seneca (although he had met his brother Gallio in Corinth, see Acts 18), we can imagine that Paul had a feeling for this atmosphere of ethical pessimism and that he was confident of winning approval with verdicts that are less popular in our times.

That Paul really did share special traditions with Seneca can be verified in the case of the idea of *conscience*. Many years ago Krister Stendahl protested against reading Luther and Augustine back into the letters of Paul.<sup>39</sup> The truth in his case was that Paul did not yet know that relentless search for selfish motives behind such innocent behaviour as a baby's cry for milk. Nor did he question the purity of religious zeal if it did not include the willingness to be bound for hell if that were God's will. But to speak of Paul's 'robust conscience' creates a misleading impression. As a matter of fact, our very idea of conscience (as judging our past actions *and ruling our decisions for future actions*) was just emerging at the time of Paul – and the apostle shared this development. It is a development in which Roman authors seem to have gone beyond their Greek teachers. Especially the use of the term in Rom. 13:5, where conscience serves as moral authority *independent of societal sanctions*, is in line with frequent statements in Latin literature.<sup>40</sup> Again, the most impressive evidence comes from the writings of Seneca, who, although primarily in a Stoic tradition, recommended the practice introduced by Epicurus to scrutinise one's conscience every evening. A striking convergence with Paul can be observed when Seneca gives conscience a religious dimension:

A god is near to you, with you, in you. Yes, I say, my Lucilius, a holy spirit has his seat in us, an observer and guardian of our bad or good (actions). He deals with us as we deal with him. Indeed, nobody is a good man without (the help of) a god . . . In every single good man 'lives a god, though which god, is uncertain'." (*Ep. Mor.* IV 41:1–2).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See his essay 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West' in *HThR* 56 (1963), 199–215.

<sup>40</sup> See Cicero, *Milo* 83; Velleius Paterculus, *Hist. Rom.* II 115; Seneca, *Vit. Beat.* 20:4; *Ira* III 41:1; *Benef.* VI 42:2.

<sup>41</sup> The quotation within the quotation is from Virgil, *Aeneis* 8:352.

Replace the polytheistic, generic 'god' with the Biblical name 'God', and you arrive at something very near to Rom. 2:15–16.<sup>42</sup> And there you can see from the closing of v. 16 ('according to my gospel') that Paul invested this notion of conscience with the highest possible importance – probably because in the life of Gentiles it played the part which the Torah played in that of Jews (see v. 14).

So what? Did Paul simply share such ideas as a part of the education he had received? As 'a Hebrew of Hebrews'? To me that strains our historical imagination too much. Instead, I suggest that he kept learning from every milieu in which he lived and proclaimed the Gospel, and that his thinking was increasingly moving towards Rome while he was planning to go there with increasing impatience.

#### A ROMAN PATTERN OF 'NOBLE DEATH' ECHOED IN ROMANS?

In recent years, attention of New Testament scholars has been drawn to the notion of 'noble death' in ancient pagan sources.<sup>43</sup> While the traditions about Jewish martyrs from the second century BCE had been taken into account in earlier studies concerning the meaning of Christ's death, these recent studies have broadened our horizon. The very stories about Jewish resistance against the Hellenisation of Jewish religion in 2 and 4 Maccabees turned out to have been influenced by Hellenistic thought-modes. They share the concept of noble death – 'noble' because of the reasons for dying and for the way it was accepted and endured.

In Romans 5:7 Paul alludes to cases of voluntary death on behalf of a righteous person or of persons who deserve such a sacrifice. He goes on to demonstrate the extraordinary quality of Christ's death in that he died for people who did not deserve such a benefit but were sinners and enemies of God. By contrast, according to John 15:13, 'there is no greater love than this – that a man should lay

<sup>42</sup> Especially if in v. 16 you accept the reading of Codex Vaticanus and my translation of *hemera* as meaning 'court' (as in 1 Cor. 4:3).

<sup>43</sup> See especially David Seeley, *The Noble Death. Graeco-Roman Martyrology and Paul's Concept of Salvation* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

down his life for his *friends*. Paul's conclusion in Rom. 5:8 is that God's love in Christ surpasses all human examples of 'noble death'.

As far as I can see, a specific *Roman* version of 'noble death' has not yet received sufficient attention in the interpretation of Romans. It should be considered as a possible background of Rom. 9:3, where the apostle refers to his readiness to sacrifice himself on behalf of his fellow-Israelites. It is not quite clear whether he speaks of a mere wish or a prayer or even a vow he once made. The content of this wish or vow was to become a 'dedication' (*anathema*) for his people. This term can mean either something dedicated for cultic purposes, for example, in temples or something devoted to evil, dedicated for destruction. In the letters of Paul, only the second meaning is attested (see 1 Cor. 12:3; 16:22; Gal. 1:8). Therefore, it is universally acknowledged that in Rom. 9:3 Paul is offering either his life or even his own salvation as a vicarious sacrifice for the salvation of Israel (see Rom. 10:1). The wording of this wish or vow recalls the Roman term for solemn sacrifices of military leaders on behalf of their armies (and the nation): *devotio*. Especially three successive members of the family of the *Decii* were renowned for having performed this sacrifice in desperate situations in order to secure the support of the gods in favour of their compatriots.<sup>44</sup> The act included a ritual of self-dedication before the commander rushed forward in order to seek death by the hands of the enemy.<sup>45</sup> The popularity of this tradition is attested by numerous allusions in Roman literature before Paul's Letter to the Romans,<sup>46</sup> and by his contemporaries Seneca, Lucanus, and Pliny<sup>47</sup> as well as by later authors.<sup>48</sup> Cicero could compare his own role as consul (when he merely risked his life without losing it in his fight against Catilina) with the heroism of the *Decii*.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> See Livy, *Ab urbe condita* VIII 6:9ff and 10:26ff.

<sup>45</sup> See descriptions given by Cicero in *De Natura deorum* II 10; *De divinatione* I 51 and Seneca in *Ep. Mor.* VII 67:9.

<sup>46</sup> See *Rhetorica ad Herennium* IV 44:57; Cicero, *De fimbis* 2:61; *Pro C. Rabirio Postumo* 2; *Tusc. Disp.* 1:89; Livy, *Ab urbe condita* IX 4:10; Manilius, *Astronomica* I 789; Valerius Maximus, V 6:6.

<sup>47</sup> See Seneca, *De beneficiis* VI 36:2; Lucanus, *Bell. Civ.* II 312–313; Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.* 22:9; 28:12.

<sup>48</sup> See Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 7:3; Ammianus Marcellinus, XVI 10:3; Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 5.18.

<sup>49</sup> See his speech *Pro domo sua* 24:64/65:65.



To be sure, Paul, as a pious Jew, was familiar with other models of sacrifice on behalf of the nation when he uttered the prayer or made the vow mentioned in Rom. 9:3. As a former zealot he must have known and cherished the example of the heroes of the Maccabean revolution whose deaths had been interpreted as sacrifices for the benefit of the people (see 2 Macc. 7:37–38; 4 Macc. 6:27–29 and 17:21–22). But that does not exclude the possibility that in Rom. 9:3 he chose a wording that would appeal to Roman ears.<sup>50</sup>

The memories of Maccabean martyrdom are also discussed as a possible background for the interpretation of the saving death of Christ in Rom. 3:24–26. The alternative interpretation – that *hilasterion* in Rom. 3:25 is an allusion to the *kapporet* or 'mercy seat' of Lev. 16 and, hence, to the feast of atonement – suffers from the weakness that it is doubtful whether readers of Romans had sufficient insider knowledge about rituals from *first* temple times to be able to understand this allusion.<sup>51</sup> While the general idea of atonement through sacrifice was certainly rooted in cultic performances, the application of this idea to the death of martyrs was not fixed to a specific sacrifice. As a model for the interpretation of Christ's death, the traditions about human martyrdom offered a nearer analogy than sacrifices of animals in a former ritual of old Israel. Having detected a convergence of Jewish and Roman traditions about martyrdom on behalf of the nation, the case for assuming this background for Rom. 3:24–26 has been strengthened. It is worth noting that the idea of *redemption* (*apolytrosis*) of the nation *through the blood* of a dying hero is also attested in connection with the Roman *devotio*. In a dialogue between Brutus and Cato (Uticensis), Lucanus makes Cato allude to Decius and reflect his own impending death with the words: 'May my blood *redeem* the commonwealth, may my death be a propitiation for whatever

<sup>50</sup> Jan Willem van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People. A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees* (Leiden, 1997), 146–151, 208–9, describes this Roman tradition and quotes some of the relevant texts. He even discusses the possibility that already the Maccabean martyrdom stories might have been influenced by the Roman *devotio*. (Note: there had been diplomatic contacts between the Maccabees and the Romans! See 1 Macc. 8 and 12:1–4:16; 14:16–19, 24).

<sup>51</sup> The original *kapporet* of the first temple had been removed by the Babylonians and as far as we know there was no substitute in the second temple.

punishment the degeneration of Rome may deserve.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Seneca asks his friend Lucilius:

If circumstances demand that you die for your country and *pay* with your own salvation for the salvation of all citizens – will you be ready to offer your neck willingly, not reluctantly?<sup>53</sup>

Even the idea of peace with the gods restored by the *devotio* of the Decii is discussed by Cicero.<sup>54</sup>

To sum up: Paul certainly did not *need* pagan models in order to develop the idea of sacrificial death. But the Roman tradition starting from the rite of the *devotio* of military leaders was so popular that it could serve as a model for communicating this part of the Gospel of Christ in a Roman environment. Rom. 9:3 comes even closer to this Roman tradition because Paul offers himself as a sacrifice for *his nation*. Thus, there is reason to assume that Paul knew this tradition and was willing to exploit it in the course of his intended preaching in Rome.

With the evidence presented in this chapter I hope to have made a case for the presence in Romans of a hermeneutical strategy at least similar to the modern idea of contextualisation. While the essential attitude behind it is attested in 1 Cor. 9:20–23, it could not be taken for granted that it was applicable to the cultural differences of local milieus and to the different profiles of Pauline letters. In recent years there have been several studies of local milieus as reflected in New Testament letters. I expect that such studies will confirm and correct each other and in the long run will contribute to a more dynamic picture of New Testament theology as a process of communication in time and space.

<sup>52</sup> See *Bell. Civ.* II 308–313.      <sup>53</sup> See *Ep. Mor.* IX 76:27.

<sup>54</sup> See *De natura deorum* III 15.