

ROMANS DISARMED

RESISTING EMPIRE / DEMANDING JUSTICE

SYLVIA C. KEESMAAT | BRIAN J. WALSH

“Sylvia and Brian are two of my favorite Bible scholars. Whether you’re over-churched or under-churched, they stir in you a fresh curiosity for the Bible. This new book is perfect for scholars and new Bible readers alike, and for everyone in between. They rescue one of the most misused books of the Bible from the hands of colonizers and crusaders. And they help us listen with first-century ears to the anti-imperial love story of Romans.”

—**Shane Claiborne**, author, activist, and cofounder of Red Letter Christians

“If you want to hear—and experience—Paul’s letter to the Jewish and gentile Christ-followers in Rome as you never have, read this book. And re-read it. Study it in your church circles. Talk about it with your friends. Assign it in your courses. As with their earlier *Colossians Remixed*, Keesmaat and Walsh have once again interwoven close textual reading of the New Testament (they clearly *love* the Scriptures!) with its unabashedly Jewish roots and its explosive relationship to the Roman imperial context. Most importantly, they bring the message of Romans into dialogue with our lives today, as we struggle to be faithful to the good news of Messiah Jesus in our own imperial context.”

—**J. Richard Middleton**, Northeastern Seminary
at Roberts Wesleyan College

“In 1918 Karl Barth published his commentary on Romans, which ignited a profound theological turn. A century later, Keesmaat and Walsh write into the headwinds of Trumpism, deepening social disparity, ecological crisis, and endless war. Building on recent scholarship, this brilliant study engages the original audience, who labored under the shadow of empire, in a way that brings its message to life for similarly struggling North American Christians. The authors employ a robust imagination, an interlocutor, and keen historical literacy to free Romans from its captivity to dogmatic and pietistic interpretations, restoring it to its social context (with all its disturbing parallels to our own). The result is a fresh and committed reading by two of our generation’s best interpreters of Word and world. May it, too, inspire a turning!”

—**Ched Myers**, Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries

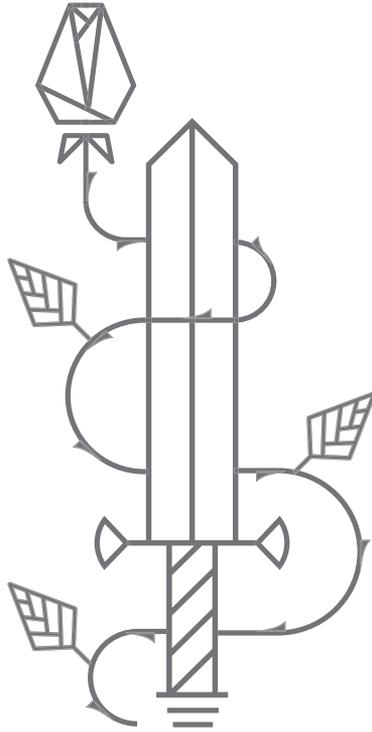
“You (and I!) have never read Romans like this before. It has been weaponized by some and reduced to abstraction by others as has perhaps no other biblical book. Sylvia Keesmaat and Brian Walsh have disarmed such uses and returned it to the real, flesh-and-blood world. The sheer immensity of the gospel, announced as it is

in the midst of the frightening, frustrating, groaning grind of actual life, is nothing short of exhilarating. The scholarship herein provides a deep foundation for an imagination that is even greater. Keesmaat and Walsh introduce to the hermeneutic process both a present-day interlocutor, who raises many of the questions and objections you may have yourself, and two residents of ancient Rome, who ‘hear’ the epistle as it is first read, granting us fresh access to the world we live in and how we are invested in it. The authors don’t attempt to wrestle from the text (yet again) Paul’s systematic theology of the gospel; instead, by rooting their exegesis firmly in history, the practical and revolutionary nature of the gospel is revealed. Here the empire of any era, including our own, is disarmed and its caesar cast down; its perverse values repudiated; and the liberating, home-making, salvific power of a greater Lord and King is revealed.”

—**Greg Paul**, Sanctuary Toronto community member and author of
God in the Alley and *Resurrecting Religion*

“In *Romans Disarmed*, Keesmaat and Walsh use an artistic mix of story, poetry, imaginative discourse, and solid biblical and social-cultural-historical background that allows the reader to understand the book of Romans from an alternative, and I believe more accurate, point of view. Paul’s letter to the Romans was not written from an enlightenment-bound worldview and this book dislodges any such notions. I am grateful for the authors’ skill in helping us all view the apostle Paul’s world and ours through an unconventional and more preferable lens; one that has tremendous practical application for us today.”

—**Randy S. Woodley**, author of *Shalom and the Community
of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*



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To the Sanctuary Community
a city of refuge in the heart of Toronto

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1

Reading Romans and Disarming Empire

Joy and Sorrow in the City of Refuge

It takes fewer than two bars for everyone to know what's up. Fewer than eight beats and anyone who hasn't been dancing joins the throng. Hands raised, feet moving, smiles of recognition, faces of joy.

There we were. Rich and poor, Indigenous, white, Black, and Asian, well-housed and homeless, straight, gay, trans, and bi, young and old, male and female, all dancing till kingdom come.

You see,

There's a city across a river
and it's shining from within.
People are dancing on the ramparts
beckoning to you, come on in,
to the city of refuge.¹

It's another night at Grace's. Another night of music and art at Sanctuary in Toronto.² Another night of celebration.

1. Red Rain, "City of Refuge," track 3 on *A Night at Grace's*, Red Rain, 2006. Used by permission.

2. Sanctuary is an amazingly inclusive church and ministry in the downtown core of Toronto, and Red Rain is, in effect, the rock band that founded this church. See www.sanctuarytoronto.ca.

It is the thirtieth anniversary of Red Rain, the rock and blues band that has always been at the heart of this inner-city church. And as the band launches into “City of Refuge,” the Sanctuary Community dances with deep longing and enthusiastic joy, with faith and doubt, with tears of loss and hope, and with a confidence that *this* dance floor *is* a city of refuge, even as we long for the liberation of that other city, across the river, that’s shining from within. This night *we* are dancing on the ramparts beckoning everyone to come on in to the city of refuge.

We didn’t have to bribe the doorman to get into this party. We didn’t have to be one of the beautiful people to get into this club. We didn’t need to have a ticket or dress a certain way or know the right people. There were no reserved seats and no preferential treatment for certain folks. And on the dance floor, the only thing that got special attention was the enthusiasm of your dancing, there for all to enjoy.

The joy was palpable. As we belted out that chorus together about a city across a river that’s shining from within, the shining seemed to come directly from us. There was light, liberation, and deep, deep joy on that dance floor.

But just a few feet from the dancing throng, something else was happening. Just on the edge of the dance floor, there was deep, deep grief. Frenchy had been the first guy on the floor that evening. There he was, all by himself, dancing and beckoning others to join him. Frenchy was grooving to the music, hands outstretched, embodying joy. And there he stayed throughout the first set and into the second.

Until something happened. We don’t know what it was. Maybe a line in a song hit him hard. Maybe he just remembered something. But in the midst of his joy, sorrow surfaced. Frenchy sat on the sidelines and wept. Surrounded by friends who were holding him in their arms, Frenchy wept and wept and wept.

And somehow, though he could no longer dance, we all knew that he was still in the city of refuge. Whether he was on the dance floor in exuberant joy or collapsed in a chair in profound grief, this party, this community, this place remained a city of refuge for him. He was safe in his joy and safe in his sorrow.

When the apostle Paul describes the character of the Christian community living at the heart of the Roman Empire, he writes, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). Frenchy asked us to do both of those things that night at Sanctuary: join him on the dance floor, embracing the joy of life in music and liberating dance, and then sit with him, embracing him in his grief, loss, pain, and hurt.

While hope is born of joy, grief is the child of shattered hope. When the apostle offers his first doxology in the epistle to the Romans, he writes, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope

by the power of the Holy Spirit” (15:13). This comes at the end of a passage calling the Roman Christians to be a community of radical welcome. Only in such expansive hospitality will the “gentiles” rejoice. Welcome begets joy and joy begets hope. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so *that* you may abound in hope.” We need joy, the apostle is intimating, if we are to have hope. And the joy on the dance floor that night—Frenchy’s joy and everyone else’s—proved Paul’s point. While we were dancing together, even though we all knew of the hard evidence against joy in our city, in our own lives, and all around us, the joy of the dance filled us with hope nonetheless.

Until it didn’t. At a certain point, the joy of music and dance could not be sustained and the sorrow took over. Frenchy and the rest of the community had good cause for sorrow, good cause for losing hope. So many had died in the past months. So many had been beaten down, bruised and abused by a life of poverty, alcoholism, disease, violence, drug abuse, and homelessness. So many had borne the scars, the festering wounds of racism, oppression, and cultural genocide. And so many of those who had been lost were Indigenous brothers and sisters.

Each death hurts, but there was one death that was still very close and raw in the community that night. Greg “Iggy” Spoon had died on March 17, 2015, one day short of his forty-seventh birthday.³ This First Nations brother had seen some hard times. He was bruised and broken, acquainted with grief.⁴ His life was plagued with alcoholism and other substance abuse, homelessness, violence, and trouble with the police. And yet Iggy was recognized in the Sanctuary Community as an artist, a teacher, and a friend. It was never easy with our brother Iggy, but something about this man made him a respected member of the community. When he was admitted into the intensive care unit in early March, the community set up a twenty-four-hour vigil. Iggy, who had spent so much of his life on the streets, was never alone. And when he died, he was surrounded by some twenty friends and family, so deeply was Iggy loved and honored. His memorial service was a standing-room-only event. Frenchy was Iggy’s close friend.

This party, the thirtieth anniversary of Red Rain, happened with the pain of Iggy’s death still fresh in everyone’s hearts.⁵ The release, two days earlier, of the

3. Greg Paul shares something of Iggy’s story in his *Resurrecting Religion: Finding Our Way Back to the Good News* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2018), 173–79.

4. See Anna Bowen, “Cop Out,” March 19, 2014, *This*, <https://this.org/2014/03/19/mayjune-cover-story-cop-out/>.

5. Since Iggy’s passing, there have been other deaths in the First Nations community connected to Sanctuary, one from a massive heart attack and another from suicide. And Ramsey Whitefish, who mournfully sang a lament at Iggy’s memorial service, was murdered.

report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission only deepened the sense of hurt and betrayal.⁶ This prestigious body openly declared that Canada's policy of forceful removal of Indigenous children to place them in church-based residential schools amounted to nothing less than an act of cultural genocide. This was an important, yet deeply painful, truth. This wasn't a social "issue" for us. This was personal. This was about Iggy and Chris and James and Fred and so many other members of the community. This report described a shared grief in our midst.

You need a great capacity for joy if you are to sustain life in the midst of such sorrow. But any "joy" that averts its gaze from sorrow, any "joy" that will not embrace the grief and hurt at the heart of things, is cheap sentimentality at best, an emotional cover-up and lie at worst. And if you are going to look sorrow in the face, then you will need to name names. You will need to have the courage, audacity, and prophetic honesty to name the source of that pain, and to name the forces that will strip us of hope.

Our friends at Sanctuary understand this better than most. And so Red Rain introduced a new song that night. It is called "Iggy's Song." Slowing things down and moving the show to a place of quieter introspection, Red Rain front man and Sanctuary pastor Greg Paul spoke of joy and sorrow, of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and of Iggy. And then lead guitarist Dan Robins began to sing the song that he wrote, starting with the chorus:

I saw you shaking your head
I clearly heard what you said
Another f***ing drunk Indian better off dead
You don't know s*** about me⁷

Dan Robins isn't a man given to profanity. He's usually the guy with the innocent, though slightly off-the-wall, humor. But not tonight. Taking Iggy's voice, and the voice of so many of our other Indigenous friends, Dan named the attitude of dismissal and disgust that our friends face every day on the streets of Toronto and throughout the Americas. And he named the reality that shaped that attitude: "You don't know s*** about me."

6. Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has now been transferred to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR). The report of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission can be accessed at their archived website: <http://www.trc.ca/web/sites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890> or at <http://nctr.ca/reports.php>.

7. The publisher does not allow the rendering of certain expletives in print; hence we have emended the original lyrics.

The song proceeds to educate the hearer about “the crack and meth and Listerine / the cheap booze and weed and gasoline / the suicide and incest and fear you’ve never seen.” This was Iggy’s reality. But this brokenness didn’t come from some inherent character fault in First Nations people. No, it has its roots in colonial oppression.

Raped by the white man for hundreds of years
 The traders, the army, and the pioneers
 The government, police, and the church overseers
 You don’t know s*** about me

You don’t know about the despair and anguish of the reservations, the squalor of a system of neglect and broken promises. You have no idea of the rich spirituality that has been desecrated and bludgeoned to death.

Abused since we were babies, no one heard our cries
 You’re so quick to judge, so quick to despise
 My heart feels the hatred there in your eyes
 You don’t know s*** about me⁸

The loud and boisterous crowd at Sanctuary was rendered silent. One community member, whose shouts of joy tend to pierce the air at these kinds of parties, came over to us to be held in her sadness and to ask for prayer.

Paul writes his epistle to the Romans from a place of “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” (9:2). We suspect that you can’t really understand what Paul is up to in this ancient letter if you don’t have some access to such a place. In his opening greetings Paul says that he has been “longing” to visit the Christian communities in Rome so that there might be some mutual encouragement (1:11–12). This isn’t just a polite way to say that he’s tried to get there but circumstances have prevented such a visit. No, there is a longing here that can be heard throughout the letter. Paul’s desire for mutual encouragement is in the face of a deeply discouraging situation. There is a pathos to Paul’s writing that gets lost when interpretation gets too focused on the nature of the theological argument that Paul is mounting. For example, it is no accident that when Paul uses the psalms of Israel in his writing of this letter, he tends to reach for psalms of lament.⁹ Here, it would seem, the apostle finds a spiritual

8. Dan Robins, “Iggy’s Song,” unpublished. Used by permission.

9. E.g., Pss. 10; 18; 44; 71; 94; 110; and 143.

and emotional resonance with his own understanding of the gospel at the heart of the Roman Empire.

Indeed, for the apostle, this pathos, this longing, goes all the way down and all the way up. A bondage has taken hold of creation, and that is why all of creation “has been groaning in labor pains” (8:22), longing to be set free, aching for rebirth. And as creation groans, so also do we “groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (8:23). There is a resonance here between the anguish of humanity and the anguish of creation that a person like Iggy would deeply understand. But the pathos that goes all the way down to the core of creation also goes all the way up to the heart of God. In concert with both human and nonhuman creation, the Spirit “intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (8:26). In the face of the violent, fruitless, and despairing bondage of creation and humanity, the Spirit adds her voice with wordless groans. Again, Iggy would get this.

Somehow we will have to find ourselves in the midst of this pathos, this sorrow and anguish, if we are going to understand Paul’s letter to the Romans. We will need to find ourselves both on the dance floor in liberating joy and on the sidelines holding Frenchy, keeping vigil at Iggy’s bedside, bearing witness to one more death, one more betrayal, one more deep, deep hurt, with tears running down our cheeks. Without standing in such places, we will miss the power of this epistle both in its ancient context and in a contemporary reading.

There is, however, nothing generic about hurt and betrayal. Sorrow and anguish are always located in real time and real places. This kind of pathos is specific to particular hurt and oppression. As both Dan Robins’s song and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report attest, the wounds and scars of the First Nations people of Canada (and by extension all Indigenous peoples around the world) are rooted in a history of colonialism. Iggy was, among other things, a casualty of empire, and we do his memory a disservice if we do not name his pain in such a way.

In the face of such imperial hurt, Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission has called for a unilateral disarmament process. The empire of colonialism must be disarmed if there is to be justice, healing, and reconciliation with the First Nations.

Of course, empires never voluntarily disarm themselves, precisely because such disarmament would entail the dismantling of the empire itself, and that would be a betrayal of its own narrative of cultural superiority. The story of empire is always one of more cultural, economic, and military power, never less.

Indeed, from the perspective of empire, maintaining hegemony amounts to a moral imperative. The unfolding of history and the progress of civilization depend on the growth of the empire. From the center of empire, relinquishing such power voluntarily is unimaginable. From the margins, however, from the places at the edge of empire and especially among the casualties of empire, disarming the empire is both imaginable and crucial if there is to be hope. After hearing the stories of thousands of Indigenous Canadians and bearing witness to their pain and anguish, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's call to repudiate the ideology of conquest, assimilation, and genocide amounts to a disarming of the foundations of a colonialist society.

What happens if we read Paul's letter to the Christian house churches in Rome as something akin to a call to disarm the empire? What happens if we read this letter written to the heart of the empire from the perspective of the margins of that empire? What happens if we read Romans at the edge of the dance floor, weeping with Frenchy? Or holding Iggy's hand as his broken body and broken heart lie dying in the intensive care unit? What happens if we bring that pathos, longing, and hurt to hearing Romans and then allow Paul's ancient letter to speak into our own context of twenty-first-century empire?

Romans, the Gospel, and Empire

Hang on a minute. I've got to interrupt you at this point. I'm not trying to be rude, but I have a whole load of questions about this project, and you've hardly even begun.

You don't think that you could wait until we have a little more on the table before you start raising your questions?

No. I simply can't keep reading without getting some stuff off my chest.

Then by all means, what's bothering you?

Well, as I was reading, I found myself on that dance floor with you that night. I could feel the joy of the community, and I've got to admit that my eyes started to well up as you told the stories of Frenchy and Iggy. And while I don't usually use the kind of harsh language that we meet in "Iggy's Song," I could see the painful truth of what Dan Robins wrote. So translating that hurt and grief into the apostle's "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" made sense to me, even if that is not the way I usually read the Bible. Sure, let's read Romans through the lens of this kind of sorrow and anguish and see what happens.

What has got me struggling is the idea of reading Romans from the margins. It all seems so pretentious. I mean, how can a couple of PhDs like you two even pretend to

be writing from the margins? You guys personally and professionally are too successful and secure to be able to do that.

But it isn't just the question of how you can relate in any way to the margins. It's also the question of how the church could ever dare to speak from the margins, given its own important role in colonialism, its own comfortable position and support of empire.

And while I'm at it, let me also say that the church has used Paul's letter to the Romans as a weapon in its own internal wars and as a sword against anyone seen to be outside the so-called theology of the letter. How can we go about disarming any empire if we are appealing to a text that has been used in the arming of that empire?

Wow. You've jumped right into the most difficult questions.

First, you are right that we have no privileged access to the margins of the imperial world in which we find ourselves. Even if we strive in our life together and as a family to seek alternative ways of life that would subvert the empire, we are still, by virtue of education, economic class, race, and cultural power, people close to the center and far from the margins. And we make no claims to speak on behalf of those at the margins and certainly not on behalf of any First Nations brothers and sisters.

If we have any access to the margins, to the hurt and betrayal that was born in our brother Iggy's body and soul, then it can only be through deep listening and shared tears. With a deep spiritual intentionality we must weep with those who weep, even as we rejoice with those who rejoice.

Second, you are right about the church as well. How can the church, which has been so close to power, so close to wealth, privilege, and cultural legitimacy—indeed, so close to empire—ever speak from the margins? It is pretty hard to presume to be a church at the margins when we maintain all the vestiges of the center. How can the church be a force for disarming the empire when its bishops still wear imperial purple?

The good news, however, is that the church has itself been marginalized. Having aided and abetted empire during the period of conquest, and even having faithfully served as an agent of cultural genocide by colluding with the governing powers in the residential schools, the church now finds itself discarded as an irrelevant institution of a past era. We got in bed with the forces of modernity, and once they had had their way with us, we were sent back to the street, abused, confused, and of no further use. The end of "Christendom" is a profound blessing. It is true that the church did not engage in a process of unilateral cultural disarmament. No, that was left for history to accomplish. Or perhaps we could say that God brought an end to "Christendom" so that a church now stripped of

its cultural power could be liberated from empire and take up its proper mission in the kingdom of God.

Part of our strategy in this book is to see how Paul addresses Christians living at the center of the Roman Empire in order to discern how the church might live at the margins of our own imperial reality.

Well, that prompts my third question. The letter to the Romans and disarming the empire? Romans as a counter-imperial epistle? Romans from the margins? Not only am I having a hard time seeing how this ancient theological treatise was a threat to the Roman Empire, let alone any other empire in history, but it seems to me that when Paul finally does address the empire in chapter 13, all that he can counsel is unquestioning obedience.

This is, of course, the central interpretive question. And really there are two questions here. First, is Paul writing a theological treatise in Romans, a systematic outline of his theology? Second, did this letter serve to legitimate or subvert the foundational myths, symbols, structures, and practices that characterized life at the center of the empire?

Let's begin with the first question. The sheer scope of this ancient document gives some credence to the notion that Paul is writing some sort of systematic theology here. But by those terms, the Corinthian correspondence is even larger than Romans, though no one thinks that those letters represent a systematic summation of Paul's understanding of the gospel.

Of course not. The letters to the Corinthians are clearly addressing particular crises in the community at that time.

Precisely. The Corinthian letters, like all of Paul's letters, are addressed to Christian communities in particular places.¹⁰ Rather than writing to Christians in general in these letters, Paul directs his writing to a specific people and the circumstances that they face in their context. This is true of the letter to the Romans as well.

But if Paul had never met the Romans, would he have known enough about their context to address it?¹¹

Imagine that you are writing a letter to someone you have never met who lives in Washington, DC, or New York City. You would still be able to address their context. You might ask if they have been to the Lincoln Memorial or if they

10. The only exception to this is, of course, Ephesians. But even Ephesians is a circular letter written to communities in a certain geographical area.

11. Much of this section is dependent on Sylvia C. Keesmaat, "Reading Romans in the Capital of Empire," in *Reading Paul's Letter to the Romans*, ed. Jerry L. Sumney (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012), 47–64. They have been reworked here with permission of SBL Press.

have ever visited Ground Zero. You might even offer an opinion on an event that happened in one of these cities. In the ancient world, Rome had enormous stature. News traveled throughout the empire about the city, its architecture, and its rulers. In addition, what happened in Rome dictated the behavior of the rest of the empire. The story of Roman military power was circulated in art and on coins, portrayed in architecture, talked about, and retold in song. Roman law and societal structures shaped daily interactions throughout the empire.

That is all pretty general knowledge though.

You are right, but Paul and the churches in Rome had even stronger connections. Romans 16 shows that Paul personally knew quite a few of the leaders of the churches in Rome. He worked with some of them (Prisca and Aquila, v. 3); he was imprisoned with others (Andronicus and Junia, v. 7); others had provided support for him. These people would surely have conveyed to Paul a clear picture of what life in the capital was like.

Part of that picture would have been this: there is some evidence that in the year 49 CE the emperor Claudius ordered at least some of the Jews expelled from Rome. We don't know what effect, if any, this had on the new Christian communities in Rome, although we know that at least two leaders from one community were expelled. Those two were Prisca and Aquila, the courageous and creative missionary couple that Paul mentions in Romans 16. At the time Romans was written, they had only recently returned to Rome because they had been part of the forced deportation under Claudius.¹²

What we do know is that the attitude of the non-Jewish population toward Jews was generally not positive and that such tensions were likely to have been present in the earliest Christian communities as they developed.¹³ This might be why Paul repeatedly emphasizes an ethos of mutual welcome (14:1; 15:7) that abstains from exclusionary judgment (14:3-4, 10, 13). He encourages the community to "pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (14:19). And just a moment after enjoining the community to greet one another with a holy kiss, Paul urges them "to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses" (16:17). He is preoccupied with fostering a community of welcome and unity precisely because that was not the reality in the house churches of Rome.

12. Acts 18:1-3 describes Paul meeting Aquila and Priscilla (Prisca) in Corinth because all the Jews had been ordered by Claudius to leave Rome. This text also tells us that all three of them were tentmakers (or, more accurately, awning makers).

13. So also Mark Nanos, who suggests that these were precisely the tensions that would have arisen in synagogues with growing gentile adherents. Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letters* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 384.

What's this got to do with the relationship between Jews and gentiles?

Everything. Both recent history and the long story of Jews in Rome told the tale of a despised and shameful people.¹⁴ Not only were the Jews a constant irritant to Rome in that outpost of the empire called Judea; they were also held under suspicion when they lived in the city of Rome itself. So Christian or not, the non-Jewish inhabitants of the city knew that Jews were trouble. And Jews didn't have a very high opinion of gentiles either; gentiles were considered to be immoral idolaters in Jewish eyes. Now that Jews and gentiles were unexpectedly together in communities that followed Jesus, they had to learn to overcome their deep-seated prejudices about each other.

It is not surprising, then, that the conflict between Jewish and gentile Christians runs through the whole epistle. From Paul's early refrain that the gospel is the power of God for salvation "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (1:16) to his critique of the gentiles' idolatrous ways of life (1:18–32), while insisting that Jews and gentiles share equal guilt before God (chap. 2), to the retelling of the Abraham and Adam stories (chaps. 4 and 5) to the anguished retelling of Israel's story (chaps. 9–11), and in countless other ways, Paul is struggling to shape a community of Christian unity at the very heart of the empire. And that is a crisis in Rome, not because some folks are arguing that gentile converts need to submit to the laws of the Torah (as is the issue in Galatians) but because there is a made-in-Rome tension between Jewish and gentile believers.

Let's say that I'm willing to accept that Paul's letter to the Romans is in fact addressing these kinds of tensions that have arisen from these historical events. That places this letter, like his other letters, in a real sociohistorical context. But Paul still seems to be writing something like a systematic theology to address these tensions. Now exactly how that works, I'm not sure, but it seems that "justification by faith" remains the heart of his argument in this letter. That sure sounds like theology, and from what I know of the history of the church, this is the very place where the church has used this ancient letter as a weapon.

Of course Paul is going to talk about justification by faith. What else would he do when the church as a whole is facing persecution and the Jewish believers have themselves come in for a significant amount of suffering? He needs to talk about justification because this is a crisis of justice.

What does justification have to do with justice? And I'm not sure I have ever noticed the word justice occurring more than once in the letter to the Romans.

14. The expulsion of the Jews from the city under Claudius was not the first time this had happened. Such a forced migration happened in 139 BCE and then again under Tiberius in 19 CE.

N. T. Wright has helpfully described justification as God’s redemptive purpose of “setting to rights” that which has been wrong or restoring to right relationship that which has been broken. In these terms, justification has everything to do with justice. Justification is making things just, a reversal of injustice and a restoration of all relationships that have been deformed by injustice.¹⁵

We don’t find the word *justice* in our translations of the letter to the Romans because the original Greek is usually translated as “righteousness.” In Greek the word *dikaiosynē* is used to translate two Hebrew words, “righteousness” (*tsedaqah*) and “justice” (*mishpat*). The Greek word *dikaiosynē* therefore has both of those meanings. Since the word *righteousness* doesn’t have much meaning in our culture (except when we call someone “self-righteous”), we will follow Costa Rican theologian Elsa Tamez and translate *dikaiosynē* as “justice” in order to retain the social, political, and cultural overtones of the Greek.¹⁶ Just reread Romans replacing the word *justice* every time you read *righteousness* and see what happens.

Maybe I’ll do that. But first, why would this suffering raise questions of God’s justice?

How well do you know the Psalms? In Romans, Paul refers to Psalms 10, 18, 44, 71, 94, 110, and 143, all of which are psalms of lament. When these psalms cry out to God for justice, what are they looking for?

Usually for enemies to be crushed and defeated and for God’s faithful people to be vindicated.

Exactly. In these psalms, God acts in justice and faithfulness when oppressors (often gentile) are defeated and God’s people are rescued. This is what God’s covenant faithfulness looks like. And this story is not that different from the story of Rome, where those blessed by the gods (the Romans) defeat the barbaric pagan hordes.

If these are the stories that surround you, then a group of Jews who have been expelled by the empire, even if they have been allowed to come back, look like the ones who have been abandoned by God. In fact, Paul spends Romans 9–11 arguing against precisely this point. According to Paul, God has *not* abandoned his people (11:1, 11–32). And you can imagine why he needed to make this argument. The very justice of God—that is, God’s faithfulness to his people, to his promises—was at stake.

15. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, book 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 925. Also helpful is Wright’s *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 57.

16. Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective*, trans. Sharon H. Ringe (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

So this community could be thinking that because the Jews are suffering, they are no longer chosen by God?

Precisely. In a situation of gentile boasting (11:17–24; 14:10) Paul is telling another story, one where suffering does not signify defeat. And in telling that story Paul is undermining parts of the story of Israel *and* the story of the Roman Empire.

How can you be sure that his intentions are so focused? What you have outlined here are themes of suffering and justice that can be found throughout Israel's Scriptures. They are much wider than the context of these Christians in Rome. Since Paul was dealing with a story much larger than the story of Rome, isn't it possible that he would not have been addressing the Roman Empire directly? Paul was writing about cosmic issues: death, sin, and the defeat of evil at the hands of Jesus. To say that he was addressing the Roman Empire would be to limit the cosmic scope of his vision and his writings.¹⁷ In other words, while the crisis in the community might be real, and even suffering at the hands of Rome might be in the background of this letter, doesn't Paul have bigger fish to fry than to worry about the Roman Empire specifically?

That would be a compelling argument, except for one thing. Throughout the biblical story the people of Israel need to learn how to be faithful to the covenant God in their particular time and place. Moses does not warn the Israelites in Deuteronomy in merely abstract terms about choosing the path of death; rather, he names the idolatry of Canaan and the threat of acting like they are still in Egypt.¹⁸ Similarly, the prophets do not call Israel to faithfulness merely by pointing out grand cosmic themes; rather, they root those themes in the specific unfaithful practices of Israel and Judah, with regard to *this* land and *these* people and *those* political alliances.¹⁹

Faithfulness to the covenant God is always embodied in particular historical situations and contexts. Conversely, the challenges to such faithfulness—the power of evil, death, or injustice (*adikia*, as Paul puts it)—are always embodied in particular narratives, particular idolatrous practices, particular symbols. There is no way to address the large themes without talking about what they look like in *this* place and with *this* people. Throughout all biblical literature, those places

17. This argument is found in John Barclay, *Pauline Churches and the Diaspora Jews* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), chap. 19. N. T. Wright engages Barclay's argument in some depth in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, book 2, pp. 1307–19.

18. Deut. 4:3; 12:2–4, 29–31; 16:21–22; 17:16; 18:9–14; 24:17, 21; 29:16–18; cf. Lev. 19:36.

19. E.g., Isa. 5:8–10; Jer. 5:26–29; Hosea 5:13; 7:11–13; 8:1–10; Amos 2:6–8; 3:9–11; 4:1–3; 5:10–13; 6:4–8; 8:4–6; Mic. 2:1–2; 3:9–11.

invariably had the shape of empire. Walter Brueggemann is right: biblical faith is always shaped “in the shadow of empire.”²⁰

Say that I accept your argument that Paul would have been aware of the context of the churches in Rome. It is still not clear that he addressed the Roman Empire in this letter. I've never picked up on any “shadow of empire” in Romans. I mean, Paul doesn't mention the empire once, nor does he refer to any emperors, and he doesn't explicitly say anything about the imperial story.

That is correct. And yet the symbols, vocabulary, and structure of the empire underlie the world that he describes in Romans.

Why doesn't Paul just come out and say that he is challenging Caesar and the empire?

Paul doesn't need to make such an overt statement. It is similar to that old campaign where Christians said “Jesus: He's the Real Thing” as a cultural reference to the Coke campaign that proclaimed “Coke: It's the Real Thing.” If they had spelled it out, “Jesus, not Coke, is the real thing,” their assertion would have lost some of its power. But, more importantly, they didn't need to explain it; everyone knew what they meant.

I have no idea what you are talking about. Perhaps that isn't the best example.

Actually, it proves our point entirely. When we were young, everyone knew that this Christian slogan challenged an advertising claim. It didn't need to be spelled out. But now it does. In the same way, Paul's language in Romans didn't need to be spelled out at the time, because everyone understood his allusions to the empire. It is only now that we have to do the clumsy work of explaining the references.

So you are saying that because we are no longer living in the context of ancient Rome, we don't catch all the allusions?

That's right. Let's take a more current example. If in an election year someone were to go on a lecture tour titled “Jesus for President!,” that phrase alone would convey a challenge to the story of American presidency.²¹ Or if we had a

20. Walter Brueggemann, “Always in the Shadow of Empire,” in *Texts That Linger, Words That Explode: Listening to Prophetic Voices*, ed. Patrick Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000). See also Richard A. Horsley, ed., *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008). Wes Howard-Brook offers an expansive reading of the whole Bible in terms of empire in “Come Out, My People!": *God's Call out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010). For our own situating of Paul's writings in the context of empire, see Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), esp. chaps. 3 and 4.

21. Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw did go on such a lecture tour with this title in 2008. Their book that accompanied the tour, *Jesus for President: Politics for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), contrasts the gospel of Jesus with the “gospel” of both Rome and contemporary American culture.

bumper sticker that said “God Bless the Whole World. No Exceptions,” it is likely that you would see this as a challenge to the more prevalent bumper sticker that says “God Bless America.” Or if we had a slogan that said “Amish for Homeland Security,” you would understand that we were saying something about the current militaristic nature of the Department of Homeland Security, and that we were suggesting a less violent alternative.²² These examples make sense to us because we know the larger cultural context of the allusions. Paul didn’t need to be more explicit because at the time his allusions made sense in terms of the wider cultural narrative. For us, however, two thousand years later, a little explanatory work is necessary.

I think an example from Romans would be helpful.

Well, let’s consider the first four Greek words of the letter: “Paul, a slave of Messiah Jesus.”²³ Just imagine how this would have sounded in the context of an empire governed by status and a culture governed by an honor/shame dynamic. Rather than introduce himself in language designed to increase his social standing, Paul deliberately uses a phrase that identifies him with those at the bottom of the social ladder.

Four words and the author has already given notice. Four words and the oppressive hierarchical structures of Rome are thrown on their heads. Paul has, in these mere four words, set the agenda for his most extensive letter of subversion.

Paul . . . a slave. Not Paul, a citizen of Rome. Not Paul, claiming to have the legitimacy that is afforded by the empire. Not Paul, enjoying his status as a citizen, a free man. No, Paul . . . a slave. Paul takes no refuge in such legitimacy but identifies himself with the lowest of the low.

And whose slave is he? Who is the master of the letter writer? To whose household does the author belong? “Paul, a slave of Messiah Jesus.” Not a slave of any Roman citizen, not a slave of any Roman household, not a slave that bears ultimate allegiance to the emperor who is the father of the whole Roman household. Not Caesar Augustus but Messiah Jesus. Let the regime and all who have dismissed the Jews as a shameful race be put on notice. Paul writes as a slave of Jesus the Messiah. The household to which he belongs is the household of Jesus, a Jewish Messiah. And he now writes to the church at the center of the empire, the church

22. This last example is from the film *The Ordinary Radicals: A Conspiracy of Faith at the Margins of Empire*, directed by Jamie Moffett (Philadelphia: Jamie Moffett Media, 2008), DVD.

23. The word Paul uses here, *doulos*, is most accurately translated “slave,” although many translations use “servant” instead. Although our English translation here is six words, there are only four words in the Greek.

sometimes close to the imperial household, sometimes oppressed by that household, and presumes to speak to this church with the authority of a slave of Jesus.

You find all that in those four words?

Yes, and the subversive nature of those four words is borne out in how he qualifies his own slavery to Jesus: “Paul, a slave of Messiah Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the *gospel of God*, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures” (1:1–2 our translation).

Just as *slave* was a word that carried significant socioeconomic meaning, so also *gospel* was a politically loaded term. The word *gospel* (*euangelion*) often referred to the “good news” of an imperial military victory.²⁴ Paul not only uses this word; he also carefully qualifies it. We can better catch the sense if we translate “gospel of God” as “the proclamation of the triumph of God.”²⁵ The implications are clear: Whose gospel has triumphed? The gospel of God, not Caesar. Paul is on dangerous political ground here. His language is seditious, and he’s only two verses into his letter!

Rome, like all empires, has a gospel, but Paul wants to make sure that his readers understand from the outset that he is proclaiming the alternative gospel of Jesus, and here in the opening sentences of his magnificent letter he delights to say so over and over again.

“Paul, a slave of Messiah Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God”—not the gospel of Caesar. While Rome’s gospel is from Nero, who has claim to the throne by being a descendent of Augustus, Paul proclaims a “gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh” (1:3). In this rare reference to David, Paul wants to make clear that the gospel he proclaims is that of a Jewish Messiah, rooted in the Jewish royal line. These are the very Jews who have been a scapegoat and object of derision in the empire.

When a little later Paul says that he is eager “to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome” (1:15), we ought not miss the audacity of this sentiment. Presuming to proclaim the gospel to those who are in Rome amounts to a radical reversal of the direction that these things go. Paul brings the gospel *to* Rome,

24. Neil Elliott, “Paul and the Politics of Empire,” in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*, ed. Richard Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 24; Dieter Georgi, *Theocracy in Paul’s Praxis and Theology*, trans. David E. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 83; N. T. Wright, “Gospel and Theology in Galatians,” in *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker*, ed. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 226–28.

25. This translation is from Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 152.

while Rome assumes that the only gospel to be proclaimed is generated by Rome and goes forth *from* Rome.

With such seditious audacity, it is no surprise that the apostle then boldly proclaims, “I am not ashamed of the gospel” (1:16). Even though he has clearly identified this gospel with those resisters to the empire who are deemed to be shameful, even though this is a gospel rooted in a story of a shameful people who have been vanquished by one empire after another, and even though this is a gospel of one who was put to shame on a cross in some far outpost of the empire, Paul is not ashamed. I am not ashamed of this gospel, he exclaims, because it is nothing less than “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:16). The gospel is nothing less than the *dynamis*, the dynamite of God that can blow the top off imperial notions of shame and the oppressive power that comes from the deceitful rhetoric of the imperial gospel.

In the face of an imperial gospel that proclaims that all salvation lies in Rome, and that identifies the emperor as both lord and savior, while bringing crosses, crippling taxes, agricultural exploitation, economic destruction, war, and violence wherever it goes, Paul brings a gospel of deep, transformative, creation-restoring salvation that turns the empire on its head. You have to realize that proclaiming Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, as Lord flies in the face of imperial ideology. This is seditious language because if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not. Moreover, this gospel reverses the order of the empire by coming to the Jew first and then to the gentile.

That’s the power of the gospel. Gospel, gospel, gospel, gospel, gospel—five times Paul names the gospel. This is a gospel that proclaims that Jesus of Nazareth is Messiah and therefore Lord of all, not because he succeeded the previous emperor, not because he has a Roman imperial lineage, and not because he has successfully deposed or murdered his predecessor but because he rose from the dead (1:4). He was declared to be Son of God not because his father is now among the gods but because he has blown open the grave, broken an imperial seal that would have kept him there, and been established as Son of God through resurrection.

And now if there is any gospel left to be proclaimed from the heart of the empire, it is that a struggling group of Jesus followers have bent the knee to the Messiah, have named him as their Lord, have embraced a faith alternative to fidelity to the empire, and have an obedience in their lives that subverts imperial obedience.

That's the good news coming out of Rome these days. That's the gospel, Paul is saying, and that's the only gospel worth talking about.

You find all that in Paul's use of the word gospel?

Yes, and more! Why does Paul introduce himself as a slave of Jesus and not a citizen of the empire? Because the gospel that he proclaims overturns the order of the empire! Paul is not a citizen but a slave. And he says that as a slave of Messiah Jesus he is in debt "both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish" (1:14).

This is socially revolutionary stuff! In an honor/shame society, in which everyone is indebted in one way or another to those above them in the social hierarchy, Paul says that as a slave of Christ, he is at the bottom of the social ladder, and therefore he is indebted to all above him. But he goes even further. He is not just indebted to the wise and the foolish, the educated elite and the illiterate masses; he is also indebted to both the Greeks and the barbarians. Speaking to the very heart of the empire, he says that he is indebted to those identified with the height of civilization, those whose myths and gods are at the foundation of the empire, *and* he is indebted to those on the margins of the empire, those who are so savage, so uncivilized, so primitive that they resist the empire and are in a constant war of terror against the empire.

Well, if Paul begins with phrases that undermine the imperial story, he moves pretty quickly to theology. The whole theme of the letter in Romans 1:16–17 is clearly about salvation, righteousness, and faith. It seems that he abandons imperial allusions in favor of the themes of biblical hope.

Not at all. Here we meet the most subversive language of all: "I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the justice of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is just will live by faith'" (1:16–17 NRSV alt.).

Again, you are translating what my Bible calls "righteousness" as "justice."

Good eye. Here is the first and most crucial place where it is important to translate *dikaiosynē* as "justice." We will have occasion to come back to these verses throughout this book, but it is important at this point to hear the imperial overtones, even as they are in dissonance with the overtones of Israel's Scriptures. This God of Israel is proclaimed as the one whose justice (*dikaiosynē*) is revealed through faith for faith (*ek pisteōs eis pistin*; 1:17). Justice and faith. With these two words, ringing with deep resonances with Israel's Scriptures, Paul challenges the imperial ideology at its core.

You see, if there is one thing that Rome prided itself on, it was Roman justice. And Roman justice was bestowed on the empire by the goddess Iustitia (*justice*; the Latin equivalent of the Greek *dikaïosynē*), who was closely identified with the reign of Augustus. Moreover, one of the lauded virtues of the Augustan reign was none other than *fides* (faith or faithfulness, which is the Latin equivalent of the Greek *pistis*).²⁶ Far from retreating into abstract theology, Paul here throws down the challenge that goes to the core of the empire's self-understanding. Where does the world meet justice and faith? In the imperial narrative of Caesar or in the story of Israel as reinterpreted in light of the story of Jesus? These programmatic verses, then, pick up the themes of the empire and powerfully reinterpret them in the context of another story, the story of the God of Israel, who has come to bring salvation through another Lord: Jesus. And as we will see, Paul draws deeply on that story, particularly those moments in Israel's Scriptures where the faithfulness of God is questioned in the face of oppression.

Come again? How does a theological assertion like “the righteous will live by faith” function as a counter-imperial rallying call?

Well, you could go back and see where Paul got the phrase. If you read Habakkuk 2, you will see that the words “but the righteous live by their faith” (Hab. 2:4) occur in an oracle that was decidedly in critique of an earlier empire, the Chaldeans. In fact, this is the immediate context of the line that Paul quotes:

Look at the proud!
 Their spirit is not right in them,
 but the righteous live by their faith.
 Moreover, wealth is treacherous;
 the arrogant do not endure.
 They open their throats wide as Sheol;
 like Death they never have enough.
 They gather all nations for themselves,
 and collect all peoples as their own. (Hab. 2:4–5)

Looks like empire, acts like empire, has the arrogance of empire, has the insatiability of empire, and engages in the violent colonializing policies of empire. In the context of empire, Habakkuk receives a vision in which the righteous will live by faith.

26. N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 404. On *Iustitia*, the Latin equivalent of *dikē*, Wright refers to Ovid's *Black Sea Letters* 3.6.25 and *The Deeds of Divine Augustus* 34.

Paul reaches back to Habakkuk's vision of how to maintain faithfulness in the context of one empire in order to shape the imagination of the Christian community for a life of faithfulness in the capital city of another. And he even agrees with a core belief of the Roman Empire. Justice is indeed rooted in faithfulness. But he is asking, *which* justice, *whose* faithfulness, and faithfulness *to whom*? It is not Roman justice, nor is it Roman fidelity that has the power of salvation. No, this is the justice of God that he is talking about, a justice rooted in the covenantal faithfulness of this God revealed in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus. And the faithfulness of this God calls forth faithfulness in response so that the one who is just is the one who will live by faith.

So you are saying that all these words—slave, gospel, lord, debt, salvation, justice, faith—carry certain kinds of meaning in the context of the Roman Empire and that Paul is deliberately using them in critique of that very empire.

Well, let's nuance that just a bit. Yes, Paul is using these terms in a way that is on a collision course with the rhetoric of the empire. But it isn't simply a matter of Paul grabbing the discourse of Rome and reinscribing it with different meaning. Rather, most of these terms have similar meaning in both the rhetoric of Rome and the imagination of Israel. For example, it would be a mistake to say that Rome uses the language of salvation and the emperor as savior in "political" ways while Paul reinterprets that same language to refer to some sort of nonpolitical "spiritual" salvation. Again, the terms carry the same range of meaning for both Rome and Israel. Salvation is invariably political in the imagination of Israel, and salvation is effected when Israel's God destroys and defeats Israel's enemies.²⁷ So the semantic range of meaning is the same. The question is the actual content of that meaning. The issue isn't whether salvation has political meaning but who is the agent of that salvation.

Why does it matter? I've always read Romans as being about salvation. Heck, I've even helped people walk the "Roman road" to salvation.²⁸ But there was nothing political about those conversions. People gave their lives to Jesus, not to a political agenda.

Look, we're happy that folks have come to put their faith in Jesus, but there is a profound danger if the Scriptures are misinterpreted in the process. You see, whether Paul's letter to believers living at the heart of the empire subverts that

27. The references are extensive: Pss. 13; 18*; 25; 35*; 36*; 37; 68; 79; 118*; Isa. 25:6-12; 33:2-6; 46:12-13; 51:4-8; 52:7-12; 62:1-12 (* = psalms quoted by Paul in Romans).

28. There are numerous references to the "Roman road" as "a well-engineered path to salvation" on the internet. E.g., "The Roman Road," All About God, <https://www.allaboutgod.com/the-roman-road.htm>.

empire or not has everything to do with what kind of gospel people will hear and what kind of Lord they will give their lives to. Spiritual salvation devoid of radical liberation from the power of empire is too safe, too comfortable. This amounts to a piety that may be personally fulfilling and rewarding but is unfaithful to the radical call to submit to Jesus as Lord of all of life.

You may be right, but I'm still uncomfortable with all of this. What about sin? Isn't salvation about sin and forgiveness?

Almost as if he anticipated your question, Paul moves from talking about salvation, justice, and faithfulness to talking about sin and, if anything, he heightens his critique of the empire in the next few verses where he criticizes those who practice injustice.

"Injustice?" My Bible reads "wickedness." What are you guys up to here? Righteousness becomes justice, and somehow wickedness becomes injustice. Sure looks to me like you are imposing a political agenda on this text.

Maybe a better way to put it is that the translations we are used to are trying to *depoliticize* the text. You see, just as *dikaioσynē* can be accurately translated as "justice," so also the word usually translated as "wickedness" carries with it a similar reference to justice. The Greek word is *adikia*, which has the same root as *dikaioσynē* and literally means "without justice" (*a* = no; *dikē* = justice), hence our translation of *adikia* as "injustice." Of course, injustice is wicked, but we invite you to do the same interpretive experiment with reading "wickedness" as "injustice" as we suggested for reading "justice" wherever you meet the word "righteousness."

If you do that here at the end of the first chapter of Romans, you will see that ungodliness and injustice always go together (1:18). Such lives of injustice betray not enlightened but darkened minds (1:21). Such people may think that they are shaping a powerful civilization, but their thinking is futile (1:21). They are not wise but are fools (1:22). And while it may look, in the splendor of the imperial elite, that they have all the glory, the truth is that in their idolatry they have exchanged their glory for cheap, hollow, and empty images (1:23, 25).

Hear this in the context of Rome. Not only is justice at the heart of the Roman imperial imagination, but it was rooted in the blessings of the gods and specifically devotion to Iustitia. But Paul describes this world as one of ungodly injustice. Here is an empire that views itself as the apex of civilization, the height of human achievement and wisdom, but Paul dismisses it as futile and foolish. Here is a culture where the glory of Rome is manifest in its cities, monuments, architecture, roads, and temples, and Paul deconstructs the whole edifice as an

idolatrous exchange of any real glory that humans might possess for cheap, disempowering imitations.

We will have cause to return to this passage on a number of occasions in this book, but just look at where all this injustice, foolishness, futility, and idolatry ends up. God gives them up “in the lusts of their hearts” to practices of degrading sexual immorality (1:24–27). Full of “every kind of injustice,” they engage in covetousness, malice, murder, strife, deceit, slander, and insolence. They are inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, heartless and ruthless. We have not rehearsed the whole list of vices in Romans 1:28–31, but you get the picture. And it would seem that anyone hearing this letter read in the city of Rome would have gotten the picture too. A picture that looks an awful lot like the imperial household! What we have here is a fairly accurate portrayal of the lives of the recent emperors, particularly Caligula. Others at that time described Caligula as cruel and malicious; he had family members murdered and engaged in outrageous and humiliating sexual predations, with both men and women. He had an incredible arrogance and divine pretensions.²⁹ The very empire that was supposed to be a manifestation of the goddess of justice was ruled by those who demonstrated the most rampant injustice.

I thought that these verses were standard Jewish diatribe against gentiles.

They may well share the rhetorical structure and tone of such diatribes,³⁰ but the all-too-clear reference to the imperial household would not likely have been lost on Paul’s audience. Indeed, the overt critique of an idolatrous life at the end of Romans 1, read with the anti-imperial overtones of the whole chapter, makes the parody of the lives of the recent emperors complete.

The apostle is at it again. The clues are all there. This is a subversive letter, undermining the imperial imagination, disarming the imperial ideology, deflating imperial arrogance, dethroning the imperial lord, and upsetting imperial hierarchies.

And then what? Or maybe I could put the question this way: So what? What do I do with all of this? Reading Romans as a theological treatise on justification by faith

29. Referring to Caligula, Neil Elliott writes,

It would be difficult to imagine a career that better illustrated the precise sequence that Paul describes:

arrogant refusal to honor the divine creator;
the turn to idolatry and worship of the creature;
a descent into defiling sexual lust;
and finally an expansive catalogue of cruelty and outrage. (*Arrogance of Nations*, 80)

30. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 272–74, who refers to Wis. 13:1–19; 14:22–31; 4 Macc. 1:26–27; 2:15.

didn't necessarily make the whole letter any easier for me to understand, but at least that reading of sin and salvation gave me a clear evangelistic agenda. It helped me to understand how I am saved by grace and not works. It gave me a moral vision that helped me to judge evil practices and know to avoid them in my own life. But what do I do with what you have just given me?

Or let's put this in your terms, not mine. What does any of this have to do with Iggy and Frenchy? How does this reading of Paul's letter relate to their lives or to a post-Christendom church? If Paul is engaging in a subversive exercise in the face of the Roman Empire, then what does that look like for people living in the early years of the twenty-first century?

"So what?" is probably the most important theological question that we can ask of an ancient biblical text like this one. Or maybe we could put the question this way: What would Paul's letter to the Romans look like if it were written in the last number of weeks rather than some two thousand years ago?

Yes, that would be a good way to put it.

Maybe one way to answer that would be to reach back to a rabbinic practice. The rabbis in the Jewish Diaspora throughout the Roman Empire used to engage in a reading of the biblical text that was somewhat different from our practices today. They would stand to read the Torah in the synagogues, but because most of their congregations did not understand Hebrew, the rabbis would have to translate as they read. And recognizing that the Torah needed to speak the word of God into the midst of the community's contemporary life, they updated the text, applying it to the changing context and employing the language of the community. The results of such an expansive interpretive exercise were called targums—extended paraphrases of the text.³¹

What happens if we do the same thing today? What happens if we take these opening paragraphs, paying close attention to the kinds of overtones to the empire that we have discerned here, and rewrite them speaking into our own sociohistorical context? What might the opening of this epistle sound like if Paul knew Iggy and Frenchy? If he had been at that party at Sanctuary? If he were writing in light of the geomilitary conflicts that we have seen since September 11, 2001? If he were paying attention to the economics of empire and the machinations around the collapse of 2008? If he knew of the rise of racism and nationalism in the last number of years?

To this kind of an imaginative exercise we now turn.

31. See Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Paul and His Story: (Re)Interpreting the Exodus Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 28–30.