

# Paul's Gift Economy: Wages, Debt, and Debt Cancellation

Ted Stolze

**Abstract:** My focus is on the Biblical prophetic warning about, and solution to, severe debt injustice – whether individual or collective. I seek to demonstrate the New Testament's continuity with the Jubilee theme of economic justice and debt cancellation laid out in the Hebrew Scriptures. In particular, I argue that Paul of Tarsus well understood the economic difficulties faced by wage laborers in the first-century Roman Empire and the all-too-real possibility of debt bondage, and – through his collection “for the poor among the consecrated at Jerusalem” – devised a creative means to reclaim the Biblical tradition of debt cancellation. In short, Paul envisioned what we could call a “gift economy” based not only on mutuality but also, and especially, on addressing the needs of the weak, vulnerable, and poor.

**Keywords:** Paul of Tarsus, Marx and the Bible, Debt, Debt Cancellation, Jubilee, Gift Economy

*For Thomas and his generation*

*“Don’t go along with the pattern of this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”<sup>1</sup>*

Some scholars (in particular Scott Meikle<sup>2</sup>) have recognized the influence of Aristotle’s economic thought on Marx, but relatively few have explored the relationship between biblical and socialist economic aims. For example, although Aristotle arguably provided the ancient world’s best account of economic value, it was not he but key figures in the Biblical prophetic tradition who grasped the danger to social justice posed by mounting economic debt and who proclaimed the need periodically to cancel it.<sup>3</sup> As David Graeber has written in his book *Debt: The First Five Thousand Years*, it is worth hoping that

... we are long overdue for some kind of Biblical-style Jubilee: one that would affect both international debt and consumer debt. It would be salutary not just because it would relieve so much genuine human suffering, but also because it would be our way of reminding ourselves that money is not ineffable, that paying one’s debts is not the essence of morality, that all these things are human arrangements and that if democracy is to mean anything, it is the ability to all agree to arrange things in a different way.<sup>4</sup>

With such a political vision in mind, my focus here is on the Biblical prophetic warning about, and solution to, severe debt injustice – whether individual or collective. I seek to demonstrate the New Testament’s continuity with the Jubilee theme of economic justice and debt cancellation laid out in the Hebrew Scriptures. In particular, I argue that Paul of Tarsus well understood the economic difficulties faced by wage laborers in the first-century Roman Empire and the all-too-real possibility of debt bondage, and – through his collection “for the poor among the consecrated at Jerusalem”<sup>5</sup> – devised a creative means to reclaim the Biblical tradition of debt cancellation. In short, Paul envisioned what we could call a “gift economy” based not only on mutuality but also, and especially, on addressing the needs of the weak, vulnerable, and poor.

Indeed, Larry Welborn has persuasively argued that in the historical context of the first-century ancient world Paul contributed “to the tentative emergence of a new category of thought – the economic.”<sup>6</sup> In particular, Welborn argues, the “novelty” of Paul’s collection was its radical alternative to Greco-Roman models of patronage, namely, “the equalization of resources between persons of different social classes through voluntary redistribution.”<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, we see not only a local redistributive pattern of equality promoted by Paul but an unprecedented – and politically subversive – global form of economic redistribution from Jesus loyalists in assemblies scattered throughout the Roman Empire, but especially in strategic urban centers like Philippi, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome.

Unfortunately, the driving force for such redistributive equality appears as a stumbling block to contemporary Christians and foolishness to Marxists:<sup>8</sup> divine grace, that is to say, an absent cause that initiates what the English sociologist (and socialist) Richard Titmuss called the “gift relationship.”<sup>9</sup> One need not personify that cause as “God” along the lines that Paul and other Jesus loyalists did in order to recognize that there must be such an absent cause to set into motion the double reciprocity involved, for example, between (a) individuals and the underlying economic structure of debt and (b) among the indebted individuals themselves.

Paul, it should be well understood, became a follower – or *loyalist* – of Jesus<sup>10</sup> after having initially opposed the movement and helped to persecute its members. It is worth reflecting briefly on the nature of that movement during Jesus’s lifetime and in the decades just after, when Paul would have encountered and ultimately embraced it.

The Jesus movement arose in the socio-historical context of – and as a bold critique of and stark alternative to – economic exploitation, indebtedness, and debt bondage.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, a generation after Jesus’s state execution at the hands of the Roman imperial order, a social explosion occurred in Galilee and Judea that had at its core the demand for debt cancellation.

The defining feature of the movement, as Richard Horsley has emphasized, was “covenant renewal,” the appeal to ancient traditions of Israelites in order to address the economic woes of Galilean and Judean peasant, artisans, and their allies (few in number, to be sure, but hardly nonexistent).

Against this historical backdrop, it is possible to see in a radically new way what have come to be known in Christian tradition as the “Golden Rule”<sup>12</sup> and the “Lord’s Prayer.”<sup>13</sup> As opposed to the traditional interpretation of these texts as outlining the basis for individual piety, it becomes striking how Jesus’s insistence on moral reciprocity entails the economic practice of mutual debt cancellation.<sup>14</sup> For example, in the early tradition conveyed by the author of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus sharply distinguishes between how he “exercises lordship” and how it is practiced by “those recognized as rulers of the nations,” in particular, how “their great ones dominate them.” He cautions his disciples that whoever “desires to become great among must be your servant, and whoever “wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” Jesus concludes his normative account of legitimate leadership by presenting himself as the embodiment of Debt

Cancellation for All: “For even the human one did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a payment for the deliverance (*lytron*) of many.”<sup>15</sup>

As Ched Myers has noted, the Greek word *lytron* (traditionally translated as “ransom”) “referred to the price required to redeem captives or purchase freedom for indentured servants.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Richard Horsley observes that such a formulation can scarcely be construed as a “proof text” for such later theories of divine atonement that have emphasize the “vicarious death of Christ.”<sup>17</sup> Rather, it should be appreciated as a “motivating sanction for the principle enunciated” in these verses. Significantly, Horsley adds, what is at stake is the “covenantal mechanism” in Israelite tradition “by which those who had fallen into debt-slavery could be ransomed and their land, which had come into another’s control, could be redeemed ...”<sup>18</sup>

Jesus once even offered a compelling parable against the refusal to cancel debts. In the Gospel of Matthew, we find the following account of an unforgiving servant (or royal “retainer”<sup>19</sup>):

... [T]he kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his retainers. When he began the calculation, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.” And having been moved with compassion for him, the lord of that servant released him and cancelled his debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and choking him, he said, “Pay what you owe.” Then his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” But he refused; then he went and threw him into jail until he would pay the debt. When his fellow servant saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” And in anger his lord handed him over to the jailors until he would pay his entire debt. [So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.]<sup>20</sup>

Taken at face value, the author of the Gospel of Matthew has framed this story as

a normative counterexample – even proclaiming eschatological divine sanction – against one individual's refusal to cancel another's debts. Yet on closer examination, one can discern the forceful indictment of not only (a) an economic system rooted in debt, threats of enslavement, imprisonment, and violence but also (b) the illusion of debt cancellation from above by benevolent rulers.

This is a compelling example of what John Dominic Crossan has called a *challenge parable*, which has no clear resolution to the conflict depicted in the narrative and so forces the listener “to think, to discuss, to argue, and to decide about meaning as present application. Here is its basic challenge. If tradition is changed, it *may* be destroyed. If tradition is not changed, it *will* be destroyed.”<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, it is not hard to grasp that the central challenge posed by Jesus in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is that, as William Herzog has argued, “neither the messianic hope nor the tradition of popular kingship can resolve the people's dilemma. To reshape their world, the people of the land must look elsewhere. Just *where* is not the concern of this parable.”<sup>22</sup> Perhaps, though, the unspoken implication of Jesus's parable is that the people should look to themselves, to their own power of debt cancellation from below. Bearing in mind the importance of debt and debt cancellation in Jesus's mission as it was remembered in the nascent Jesus movement,<sup>23</sup> let us turn now to the theological-economic contribution made by Paul of Tarsus.

Although my interest in Paul lies in his broad contribution to the Jesus movement, I shall largely focus on his letter to the assemblies of Jesus loyalists in Rome, his so-called “Letter to the Romans.” My overriding concern in providing a close reading of Paul's letter is to consider how participants in the Roman house assemblies would have reacted when they heard it read aloud and interpreted by Paul's co-worker Phoebe,<sup>24</sup> in other words, to overhear their concerns and conversations.

The vast majority of Paul's “undisputed”<sup>25</sup> letters were addressed to assemblies of Jesus loyalists with whom Paul has already established a close personal relationship, a kind of partnership. Indeed, these letters generally functioned as “problem-solving” interventions in which he tried to resolve a conflict, reiterate an important teaching or simply reassure other Jesus loyalists. By contrast, Paul's Letter to the Romans was written to a group of assemblies most of whose members he had never met. All Paul's letters typically rely on moral exhortation through paradigmatic example, but the Letter to the Romans is the most theologically – and politically – complex and is especially grounded in appeals to Jewish Scripture, in particular, the Torah and the Prophets.

Finally, in all his undisputed letters Paul confesses, in one way or another, his exclusive loyalty to Jesus as the Messiah, whose brutal death at the hands of Roman occupation forces he insists has been paradoxically vindicated as the

inspiration for an alternative vision for building anti-imperial, egalitarian human communities that Jesus already proclaimed as the “reign of God” and Paul calls “assemblies” (*ekklēsiae*) that exemplify “solidarity-partnership” (*koinōnia*).<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding Nietzsche’s uncomprehending complaint in *The Anti-Christ*,<sup>27</sup> Paul recognized that the transformative power of the Jesus movement lay precisely in its apparent *weakness* (from the hierarchical perspective of the established power of the Roman imperial order, at any rate).<sup>28</sup> This is the concrete sense of Jesus’s resurrection as signifying what Alain Badiou has rightly called an Event that demands loyalty.<sup>29</sup>

Consequently, it is hardly surprising that at the beginning and end of his Letter to the Romans, Paul clearly and directly confesses his loyalty as a follower of Jesus and thereby issues a challenge to “the dominant politics of Rome and the Roman emperor.”<sup>30</sup> Toews reminds modern readers of Paul’s letters – who standardly fail to recognize the intertwining of the theological and political in the ancient world – of the implications that the audience to whom Paul wrote (dictated, actually)<sup>31</sup> resided precisely in the capital of the Roman Empire: The center of the city had numerous temples had numerous temples to pagan gods and to the emperors of Rome. Every city block had an altar to the emperor at which people were expected to make confession or offer sacrifices. Every home was expected to have a cove with an image of the emperor.<sup>32</sup> Paul composed his letter shortly after the ascension of Nero in C.E. 54 to the emperorship. In this conjuncture, Paul’s letter operated as “a political theology, a *political* declaration of war on the Caesar.”<sup>33</sup> The basic message presented in this “letter of resistance” was undoubtedly why Paul was killed by the regime.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, as Toews summarizes,

Paul’s opening and concluding confessions in Romans are theological statements; he confesses that Jesus is the messianic fulfillment of the promises to David and the Jewish people. But every word in these confessions and in Paul’s opening statement of his mission to the capital of the empire also are loaded with political meaning – gospel, son of God, Lord, rule the nations, hope for the nations, faith, father, salvation, righteousness are all understood in Rome as referents to Augustus, the emperor. The emperor is the son of God, lord, and father of the Roman people who rules the nations, who brings hope, salvation, and righteousness to all peoples of the world.

The confessions of Paul in Romans are theo-political assertions. They simultaneously outline Paul’s understanding of the gospel and his counter-imperial claims about the politics of the gospel. Paul challenges what the people of Rome say about

the Roman emperor. The Romans got it wrong, Paul says. Messiah Jesus is the son of God, the Lord, who brings hope, salvation and righteousness to all people and who will rule the nations in behalf of God the father.<sup>35</sup>

Toews argues persuasively that confessions of faith in Paul's letters serve as declarations of loyalty. However, it is hardly obvious that, as he goes on argue, loyalty to Paul's (and Jesus's) inclusive, egalitarian vision of community – and concomitant disloyalty to Empire – requires retreat from politics and political struggles to build a more just world. Such retreat unjustifiably cedes ground to forms of class and state power and only makes more difficult the successful pursuit of one's presumed normative commitment to participate in the Jesus movement. One can strive to advance social movements, and build unions, political organizations, and parties without abdicating one's exclusive theological-political loyalty.

John Barclay has argued that to see Paul's declaration that "Jesus is Lord" is not purely, simply, and narrowly a presumption that therefore "The Emperor *is not* Lord."<sup>36</sup> For Barclay, Paul's challenge is deeper and wider than a direct political challenge to the Roman imperial order. As he argues, in Paul's cosmic scheme of powers and principalities, the Roman Empire is relegated "to the rank of a dependent and derivative entity, denied a distinguishable name or significant role in the story of the world."<sup>37</sup> This is because, Barclay adds, Paul's

systemic analysis of the world differs from ours: for him the "political" is fused with other realities whose identity is clarified and named from the epistemological standpoint of the Christ-event. In this sense the Roman empire is not significant to Paul *qua the Roman empire*: it certainly features on his map, but under other auspices and as subservient to more significant powers.<sup>38</sup>

No doubt this is true – but neither should one argue that since Paul's theological vision was *more* than political his theological vision was thereby *less* than political. A material clash of systems, interests, and values remained.

As Mark Reasoner notes, it is clear that Paul's target was more broadly the "polytheistic fabric" of the first-century Mediterranean world than it was the Roman imperial cult. And yet, Reasoner adds, somehow Paul – whether he intended it or not – posed a threat to the Roman imperial order. Otherwise, he wouldn't have fallen victim to it. Even if he was not "intentionally subverting the Roman Empire in his letters," there existed "a relationship of incompatibility" between "Paul as the apostle to the nations and the Roman Empire."<sup>39</sup>

Paul's overall theological argument in the Letter to the Romans pivots on his drawing a line of demarcation between a conception of justice as retaliation and justice as restoration: Paul sets forth and defends the historical possibility of a transition between a "regime of law" and a "regime of generosity."<sup>40</sup> Or, as Toews puts it, Paul is calling for the construction of "a genuinely egalitarian worldview and value system."<sup>41</sup>

As Justin Meggitt has amply and ably demonstrated,<sup>42</sup> in pursuit of such a worldview and value system, Paul was committed to a form of economic "mutualism" as a strategy for the survival of those living at a subsistence level in the first century world. Meggitt defines "mutualism" as "the implicit or explicit belief that individual and collective *well-being* is attainable above all by mutual interdependence."<sup>43</sup> Meggitt insists that this is more than mere reciprocity. Consider an intriguing passage in which Paul observes that

wages are not credited as a gift (*kata charin*) to a worker but as a debt owed (*kata opheilēma*). But to someone who doesn't work, trusting (*pisteuonti*) him who justifies (*dikaionta*) the ungodly, his trust (*pistis*) is credited as righteousness (*eis dikaiosynēn*). So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God credits righteousness apart from works (*logizetai dikaiosynēn chōris ergōn*): "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose errors are covered over; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not credit error."<sup>44</sup>

As Dieter Georgi comments, Paul demonstrates here a profound understanding of the relationship between wage labor and leisure. Georgi points out that whoever works for monetary gain counts on the fact that wages are not given as a favor, that is, in gracious condescension or with a similar attitude. Instead, it is expected and given according to the rate of indebtedness that accumulates according to time, energy, resources, and imagination invested and shown by the worker. This reference to wage as an indebtedness of the employer is an interesting one, certainly true today also, but not so often expressed in this kind of language. Employers on various levels have always tended to give their payments to employees a touch of grace. This is an attitude that Paul condemns outright, and Paul's opinion concerning the relationship of money and labor reflects that of contemporary society.<sup>45</sup>

Paul next considers an exemplary person of leisure: King David. Paul's point of contrast hinges on his use of the Greek words *pistis* (translated "loyalty" or "faithfulness") and *dikaiosynē* (conventionally translated as "righteousness" but also having the societal connotation of "justice"). In Paul's understanding

of the Abraham story in the Hebrew Scriptures, Abraham is not “justified” by a set of abstract beliefs about God but rather by concretely expressing his *loyalty* to God through his actions. Paul does not understand human loyalty “as a one-way concept, from the subject to the sovereign. It is a two-way affair, with the divine loyalty, in fact, preceding and causing human loyalty.”<sup>46</sup> Paul reiterates and condenses his point in the formulation: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift (*charis*) of God is eternal life in our Lord Jesus the Messiah.”<sup>47</sup> Later on in the Letter to the Romans we also find Paul’s commitment to mutualism:

Do not become indebted to anyone, except to love one another; for one who unconditionally loves another has fulfilled the Torah. For “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and, if there is any other commandment, it may be summed up in this expression: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love for one’s neighbor does not carry out evil; therefore, love is a fulfillment of the Torah.<sup>48</sup>

Paul sharply contrasts a negative requirement to avoid indebtedness with the positive requirement to love one’s neighbor – here echoing the Torah and Jesus’s “Golden Rule.” What does the avoidance of debt have to do fulfillment of the Torah? Paul appeals to a principle of economic reciprocity. Paul is sketching the outlines of an “economy of the gift” that would be based on what Peter Oakes has termed “a new scale of value,” in accordance with which “Paul is not calling for realistic assessment of oneself on the usual scales of status and intellect. He does away with these scales of achievement and inherited qualities by putting in a scale based on unmerited gift.”<sup>49</sup> As a result, Paul seeks to undermine the very hierarchical structure of honor, status, and household that served as an ideological support for Greco-Roman societies; instead he proposes a new egalitarian model of community. Toward this end, Paul offers here – as well as elsewhere<sup>50</sup> – the metaphor of a body having many parts and functions, but each contributing to overall corporeal wellbeing: “For just as in one body we have many parts, and not all the parts have the same function, just so, we who are many are one body in Christ and, individually, we are parts of each other.”<sup>51</sup> Moreover, within such an egalitarian economy, there exist diverse “gifts” that “are in line with the gift given to us”<sup>52</sup> and therefore should be shared.

Finally, though, the new system of value that Paul sketches, which reconfigures and exceeds the boundaries of the classical model of a household economy recognizes the hard work and suffering undergone by its members, but with a commitment to sharing and hospitality with all but with what could be called a preferential option for the poor: “Be in agreement with one another.

Don't be carried away to grandiose ideas but to lowly people."<sup>53</sup> As Oakes comments, the Greek word used by Paul to characterize "lowly people" is *tapeinos*, which has customarily been translated as "humble." However, the word conveys not a moral but in a social category. Indeed, Oakes continues, "Paul is probably not urging Christians to associate particularly with people who have the virtue of not thinking too highly of themselves. In this period [*tapeinos*] was much more commonly used to denote the poor. It tended more towards being pejorative than complimentary."<sup>54</sup>

Undoubtedly the fullest expression of Paul's gift economy and his commitment to economic mutualism and debt cancellation as survival strategies was his project to collect contributions to assist the poor in Jerusalem and elsewhere. This was no charitable project, as some have claimed."<sup>55</sup> Rather, as Gordon Zerbe has argued, Paul's collection was to serve as

a relief fund for his fellow Messianic compatriots of Judea, impoverished by food shortages caused by both famine and the Roman empire's tributary system of economic extraction from conquered territories. But Paul does not promote just charity and benevolence; rather, in this project he champions in concrete terms the goal of mutualism, partnership, and equality with the lowly and poor.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, increasing numbers of New Testament scholars have proposed that this collection served as a material way to demonstrate concrete commitment to "solidarity-partnership" (*koinōnia*) not only among Jesus followers but also with all those who had been "humiliated"<sup>57</sup> by Roman political domination and economic exploitation.<sup>58</sup> For example, Ross and Gloria Kinsler have argued that Paul's collection served as his concrete enactment of the ancient Israelite 'jubilee tradition' – as renewed by the Jesus movement – of debt cancellation and economic redistribution.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, Paul bears witness to the stark reality of debt bondage – and the hope of deliverance from it – even at the level of the natural world. As Paul reminds his fellow Jesus loyalists,

I consider that the sufferings of this present time (*tou nyn kairou*) are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed ([apokalyphthēnai](#)) to us. For the creation waits with eager expectation for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected ([hypetagē](#)) to futility, not of its own will but by the

will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be released from its servitude of destruction into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has groaned and agonized until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan while we wait for divine adoption, the deliverance ([apolytrōsin](#)) of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with endurance (*di hypomonēs*).<sup>60</sup>

What is striking in this passage is the metaphor by which Paul identifies how the Roman Empire not only has enslaved human beings but also has undermined and despoiled the created order of things. As Neil Elliott reminds us, “creation is ... and has long been ... a *political* topic.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the “manumission” that Paul expects is not just human but natural. Here I disagree with those who have argued that the “groans” Paul evokes in this passage have to do primarily with the “birth pangs” of a pregnant woman, essentially guided by with the image of the imminent “day of the Lord” (*hēmera kyriou*) that Paul offers in.<sup>62</sup> Rather, it appears that the references in Romans 8.18-25 have to do as well with the physical and psychological torment brought about through enslavement. These are the sufferings “of this present time,” literally, “of the now time” (*tou nyn kairou*). As I have argued elsewhere, during the course of his mission to the “nations” (*ethnē*) subjected to Roman imperial order, and by means of his letter writing, Paul *intervenes* as a thinker of the conjuncture.<sup>63</sup>

But, remarkably, Paul envisions in these lines that even the ecological debt inflicted by empire<sup>64</sup> will ultimately be cancelled in a cosmic jubilee, indeed, through the divine declaration of what Elsa Tamez has called an “amnesty of grace.”<sup>65</sup> This is what serves as the concrete basis for Paul’s – and other Jesus loyalists’ – hope. What will occur is not, as orthodox Christian theology would have us believe, the redemption of souls, but instead the “deliverance” of bodies. Here is Paul at his most materialist, identifying not only the domination inflicted by Rome – its *imperium* – but also the glorious overcoming of that domination.

Just as in his earliest use of such emancipatory imagery, though, in this passage Paul is not interested in specifying precisely when such deliverance will occur; it is enough for Jesus loyalists to wait for it “with endurance.”<sup>66</sup> Yet in a real sense, emancipation has already begun, since the Jesus loyalists are the “first fruits of the Spirit,” who an alternative way of sharing in a new egalitarian and inclusive life together, bound by the mutuality of gift exchange and not by the rational calculation of self-interest.

For contemporary Christians and Marxists alike, this emancipatory hope

in the “already-not yet”<sup>67</sup> remains a declaration of Good News. It is true that Karl Marx considered not Paul but Spartacus to be “the most capital fellow in the whole history of antiquity” and a REAL REPRESENTATIVE of the proletariat of ancient times.”<sup>68</sup> *But Spartacus was defeated.*<sup>69</sup>

Although Paul’s project came to an equally bitter end, his materialist theology continues to have practical effects; and it retains a greater affinity with the socialist project of constructing an economic system based on solidarity and allocation based on human need. It is true enough that “Paul’s exhortations, while having a sharp, socially radical edge, fall short of calling for structural social change.”<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, as Peter Oakes reminds us, “for suffering people ... the gospel validates their suffering and encourages them in their day-to-day endurance. Hope can itself have a transforming effect on day-to-day experience.”<sup>71</sup> On this basis we might even glimpse the contours of what could be called “Pauline Marxism.”<sup>72</sup>

---

1 Rom 12:2. I have followed Peter Oakes’s translation to be found in Oakes 2009, p. 99.

2 See Meikle 1985; 1995.

3 For introductions to Biblical views of money, possessions, debt, and debt cancellation, see Horsley 2009 and Brueggemann 2016.

4 Graeber 2014, p. 390.

5 Rom 15.26. I follow Gordon Zerbe, who translates the Greek word *hagioi*, which is standardly translated (for example, in the NSRV) as “saints.” As Zerbe stresses, the term renders the Hebrew word *kadoš* and emphasizes that the loyalty owed to Jesus by his followers – their “fundamental identity” – took priority over competing loyalties that other theo-political forms of identity made upon them, e.g. their “residential identity.” (See Zerbe 2016, pp. 44-45).

6 Welborn 2013, p. 88.

7 Welborn 2013, p. 89.

8 To update Paul’s declaration in 1Cor 1:23 that he preached “a crucified Messiah,” which was “a stumbling block to Jews” and “foolishness to the nations.”

9 Titmuss 1997. For Paul’s conception of “gift” (*charis*) in its first-century cultural

setting, see Barclay 2015.

- 10 I owe the designation "Jesus loyalist" to Zerbe 2012, pp. 26-46.
- 11 On exploitation, debt, and debt bondage in the ancient Greco-Roman world, see especially Ste. Croix 1981.
- 12 Matt 7:12; Lk 6:31.
- 13 Matt 6:9-13; Lk 11:2-4.
- 14 For a superb account of Jesus's project of debt cancellation, see Oakman 2014.
- 15 Mk 10:45. This early Christological formulation was retained in the Gospel of Matthew. Compare also Rom 3:24b-25a; Tim 2:6.
- 16 Meyers 2008, p. 279. On the broader topic of Roman practices of slavery, the manumission of slaves, and the stigma associated with freed slaves, see Knapp 2009, pp. 125-95.
- 17 Although I shall not do so here, one could well reflect on the ways in which the early Jesus movement articulated and advanced the interests of indebted Galilean and Judean peasants, artisans, and laborers and in which Paul later delineated the contours of a covenantal gift economy. Indeed, one could seek to construct a "materialist theology" – to borrow David Horrell's term (see Horrell 1995) – of debt and debt cancellation. Such a theology would recover, rectify, and reorient Anselm's classic work *Cur Deus Homo* along the lines of a *Cur Deus Multitudo* that would not emphasize the substitutionary – and atoning – death of Jesus of Nazareth, a lone charismatic figure but instead highlight the diverse egalitarian movement he boldly led – one that was subsequently embraced by Paul of Tarsus and redirected to a broader project, namely, "grafting" non-Jews onto the "olive branch" of Jewish tradition (the horticultural metaphor of Rom 11:17-25) – aiming at nothing less than a sweeping social-religious alternative to the Roman imperial order. At any rate, before this dissident movement was reabsorbed into, indeed *baptized* by, that order (see Howard-Brook 2016).
- 18 Horsley 2009, p. 123. Horsley cites Lev 25:25-28, 47-55.
- 19 Herzog 1994, pp. 135-49. On this parable, see also Schottroff 2006.
- 20 Matt 18:23-35. The last verse (as well as the opening verses 21-22 about the forgiveness of sins [cancellation of debts?]) is presumably an interpretative framing device added by the author of this Gospel. On the general tendency by the Gospel authors to allegorize Jesus's parables – and thereby "domesticate" their radicality – see Levine 2014, pp. 1-23.

- 21 Crossan 2012, p. 47.
- 22 Herzog 1994, p. 149.
- 23 Jesus was remembered by his followers not simply for what he did but for what he said – his ethical principles. Hence, the significance of Paul’s willingness to “remember the poor” as his mutual agreement with the “pillars” of the Jerusalem community, namely, Peter, James, and John (see Gal 2:10).
- 24 In this respect I have been influenced by the methodological approach advanced by Reta Haltemann Finger and Peter Oakes; see Haltemann Finger 1993 and Oakes 2009, pp. 127-30.
- 25 Namely, 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philemon, and Romans. For an introduction to the scholarly discussion of the authenticity of letters attributed to Paul, see Puskas and Reasoner 2013.
- 26 On the Pauline *ekklēsiae*, see Banks 1994 and Thompson 2014, esp. pp. 28-33; on Paul’s central organizing norm of *koinōnia*, see Ogereau 2012; Thompson 2014, pp. 175-98; Zerbe 2016, pp. 69-70.
- 27 Nietzsche 2005, pp. 50-51.
- 28 On Paul’s dialectical contrast between “weak” and “strong” throughout his letters, see Black 2012; on the “power of weakness” in Paul’s conception of apostleship, see Ehrensperger 2009, pp. 98-116; on his use in the Letter to the Romans in particular, see Reasoner 1999. See also Marcus 2006 and Longenecker 2015 on the disruptive ideological power of the cross in the early Jesus movement.
- 29 However, see Stolze 2016, pp. 137-40 for a complication of Badiou’s point: the fervently anticipated “return” of Jesus – in sharp contrast with imperial ceremonies of the “arrival” of the Emperor or his appointees – served for Paul as a kind of counter-Event.
- 30 Toews 2009.
- 31 On Paul’s use of secretaries, see Richards 2004.
- 32 Toews 2009.
- 33 Taubes 2004, p. 16.
- 34 See Georgi pp. 147-60.
- 35 Toews 2009.

- 36 Barclay 2016, pp. 363-87.
- 37 Barclay 2016, p. 384.
- 38 Barclay 2016, p. 385.
- 39 Reasoner 2013, p. 4.
- 40 Zerbe 2015.
- 41 Toews 2004, p. 309.
- 42 Not without sharp disagreement, however. Essentially, the complaint leveled against Meggitt's book has been that he has exaggerated the degree of homogeneity among the poor within the Roman Empire and thereby failed to provide nuance regarding social status vs. class in Pauline assemblies. (For an overview of this debate, see Friesen 2004). But Meggitt is clear that he is exaggerating "in order to bring out such an important and neglected aspect of the lives of Pauline Christians" (Meggitt 1998, p. 5). At any rate, I shall not enter into the controversy over what is the best historical-sociological method for "using economic evidence to read early Christian texts" (Oakes 2009). My concern is primarily to note the external pressure of material necessities for most Jesus loyalists to adopt what Meggitt has called "survival strategies" (Meggitt 1998, pp. 155-78).
- 43 Meggitt 1998, p. 158.
- 44 Rom 4:4-8.
- 45 Georgi 2005, p. 120.
- 46 Georgi 2005, p. 120.
- 47 Rom 6:23.
- 48 Rom 13:8-10.
- 49 Oakes 2009, p. 100
- 50 Most famously in his correspondence with Jesus loyalists in Corinth. On the political implications of Paul's metaphor of the body, see Kim 2008.
- 51 Rom 12:4-5.
- 52 Rom 12:6.

- 53 Rom 12:16.
- 54 Oakes 2009, p. 121.
- 55 This is the limitation of interpretative framework of the otherwise excellent Nickle 2009. Even Alain Badiou has recently fallen victim to this traditional misunderstanding; see Badiou 2003, pp. 28-29.
- 56 Zerbe 2012, p. 76.
- 57 For an eloquent discussion of the significance of such solidarity in Jewish and early Christian traditions, see Wengst 1988.
- 58 Among the vast literature on Paul's collection, see especially Georgi 1992; Nickle 2009; Friesen 2010; Longenecker 2010; Ogereau 2012; Welborn 2013; Tucker 2014; and Downs 2016.
- 59 Kinsler and Kinsler 1999, pp. 146-49.
- 60 Rom 8:18-25.
- 61 Elliott 2013, p. 137.
- 62 1 Thess 5.1-4. For the "birth pangs" interpretation, see Jewett 2004, pp. 41-42; and Elliott 2013, pp. 153-54. Obviously, both possible readings are overdetermined by the recurrent Roman imperial artistic rendering of domination as a subjected woman; on which see Lopez 2008.
- 63 See Stolze 2016.
- 64 On Roman imperial devastation of the landscape through such practices as copper mining and metallurgy, see Mattingly 2011, esp. 167-99.
- 65 Tamez 1993.
- 66 As Peter Oakes has noted, "endurance" (*hypomonē*) serves as a "surprisingly persistent minor motif" in Paul's letter (Oakes 2009, p. 138). Compare Rom 2:7, 5:2-5, 12:12, 15:1-2, 15:4-5.
- 67 Compare Paul's formulation in Phil 1.6 of this "eschatological tension" of history understood as a decisive event in the past, an ongoing process in the present, into which the future unexpectedly breaks. See especially Dunn 1998, pp. 461-98.
- 68 Marx letter dated February 27, 1861 to Engels (in Marx and Engels 1985, p. 265).

- 69 For a fine recent introduction to Spartacus's historical aims, see Strauss 2009.
- 70 Oakes 2009, p. 140.
- 71 Oakes 2008, p. 140.
- 72 In this respect, Marxists could reclaim Richard Titmuss's work on the "gift relationship" not only as a way to specify the damage wrought on individuals by market societies but as an invitation for Christians to reclaim Paul's own conception of a "gift economy." In his extraordinary *Paul and the Gift* John Barclay briefly acknowledges Titmuss's book but then criticizes the latter's emphasis on gifts (such as blood donation) that are "anonymous, unreciprocated and disinterested, where no return is possible or expected" (Barclay 2015, p. 60). By contrast, Barclay argues that Paul's own conception of grace/gift demands such reciprocity as the basis for robust forms of social solidarity.

---

Aland, Kurt and Barbara et al. 1997, *Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine*, 27<sup>th</sup> edition, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

Badiou, Alain 2003, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, translated by Ray Brassier, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Banks, Robert J., 1994, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting*, Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic.

Barclay, John M.G. 2015, *Paul and the Gift*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

"Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul," in *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (2016) pp. 363-87, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Black, David Alan 2012, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness: Astheneia and Its Cognates in the Pauline Literature*, revised edition, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications.

Brueggemann, Walter 2016, *Money and Possessions*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Coogan, Michael et al. 2010, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Crossan, John Dominic 2012, *The Power of Parables: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus*, New York, NY: HarperOne.

Dancer, Frederick William Dancer, 2009, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Downs, David J. 2016, *Alms: Charity, Reward, and Atonement in Early Christianity*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

*The Offering of the Gentiles: Paul's Collection for Jerusalem in its Chronological, Cultural, and Cultic Contexts*, Grand Rapids, MI: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016 [2008]

Dunn, James D.G. 1998, *The Theology of the Apostle Paul*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Ehrensperger, Kathy 2009 [2007], *Paul and the Dynamics of Power: Communication and Interaction in the Early Christ-Movement*, New York: T&T Clark.

Elliott, Neil 2013, "Creation, Cosmos, and Conflict in Romans 8-9," in *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5-8*, pp. 131-56, edited by Beverly Roberts Gaventa, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

Friesen, Steven J. 2004, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 26.3, pp. 323-61.

"Paul and Economics: The Jerusalem Collection as an Alternative to Patronage," in *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle*, edited by Mark D. Given, 2010, pp. 27-54, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.

Georgi, Dieter 2005, *The City in the Valley: Biblical Interpretation and Urban Theology*, Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature.

Glancy, Jennifer A. 2002, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Graeber, David 2014, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, updated and expanded edition, Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing.

Haltemann Finger, Reta 1993, *Paul and the Roman House Churches: A Simulation*, Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.

Herzog II, William R. 1994, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.

Horrell, David G. 1995, "Paul's Collection: Resources for a Materialist Theology," *Epworth Review* 22 (2), pp. 74-83.

Horsley, Richard A. 2009, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Howard-Brook, Wes 2016, *Empire Baptized: How the Church Embraced What Jesus Rejected (Second - Fifth Centuries)*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Jewett, Robert 2004, "The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Reading Rom 8:18-23 within the Imperial Context," in *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, edited by Richard A. Horsley, pp. 25-46, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.

Kim, Yung Suk 2008, *Christ's Body in Corinth: The Politics of a Metaphor*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Knapp, Robert 2011, *Invisible Romans*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Longenecker, Bruce W. 2010, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

*The Cross before Constantine: The Early Life of a Christian Symbol*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015,

Lopez, Davina 2008, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Marcus, Joel 2006, "Crucifixion as Parodic Exaltation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (1), pp. 73-87.

Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels 1985, *Collected Works*, Volume 41: Letters, 1860-64, New York: Lawrence and Wishart.

Mason, Steve 2016, *A History of the Jewish War A.D. 66-74*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Mattingly, David J. 2011, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Meggitt, Justin J. 1998, *Paul, Poverty, and Survival*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Meikle, Scott 1985, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company.

*Aristotle's Economic Thought*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Myers, Ched 2008, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, twentieth anniversary edition, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Nasser, Alan 2012, "What the Market Does to Our Souls: Revisiting Richard Titmuss's *The Gift Relationship*," *Counterpunch* <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/06/28/what-the-market-does-to-our-souls/>; last accessed October 22, 2016).

Nickle, Keith F. 2009 [1966], *The Collection: A Study in Paul's Strategy*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Nietzsche, Friedrich 2005, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, translated by Judith Norman, edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Oakes, Peter 2009a, "Methodological Issues in Using Economic Evidence in Interpretation of Early Christian Texts," in *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, pp. 9-34, edited by Bruce W. Longenecker and Kelly D. Liebengood, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

*Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009b.

Oakman, Douglas 2014, *Jesus, Debt, and the Lord's Prayer*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.

Ogereau, Julien M. 2012, "The Jerusalem Collection as *κοινωνία*: Paul's Global Politics of Socio-Economic Equality and Solidarity," *New Testament Studies* 58 (3), pp. 360-78.

Puskas, Charles B. and Mark Reasoner 2013, *The Letters of Paul: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

Reasoner, Mark 1999, *The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14.1-15.13 in Context*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

*Roman Imperial Texts: A Sourcebook*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013.

Richards, E. Randolph 2004, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition, and Collection*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Schottroff, Luise 2006, *The Parables of Jesus*, translated by Linda M. Maloney, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Ste. Croix, G.E.M. de 1981, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Stegemann, Ekkehard W. and Wolfgang Stegemann 1999, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century*, translated by O.C. Dean, Jr., Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Stolze, Ted 2016, "Paul of Tarsus: Thinker of the Conjuncture," *Althusser and Theology*:

*Religion, Politics, and Philosophy*, pp. 129-51, edited by Agon Hamza, Boston, MA: Brill.

Strauss, Barry 2009, *The Spartacus War*, New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Tamez, Elsa 1993, *The Amnesty of Grace*, translated by Sharon H. Ringe, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

Taubes, Jacob 2004, *The Political Theology of Paul*, translated by Dana Hollander, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Thompson, James W. 2014, *The Church according to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Titmuss, Richard 1997 (1970), *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy*, expanded and updated edition, New York, NY: The New Press.

Toews, John E. 2004, *Romans (Believers Church Commentary)*, Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.

"The Politics of Confession," *Directions*, 2009, Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 5-16 (<http://www.directionjournal.org/38/1/politics-of-confession.html>; last accessed November 4, 2016).

Tucker, J. Brian 2014, "The Jerusalem Collection, Economic Equality, and Human Flourishing: Is Paul's Concern the Redistribution of Wealth, or a Relationship of Mutuality (or Both)?" *Canadian Theological Review*, Vol. 3, Issue 3, pp. 52-70.

Welborn, L.L. 2013, "'That There May Be Equality': The Contexts and Consequences of a Pauline Ideal," *New Testament Studies* 59, pp. 73-90.

Zerbe, Gordon Mark 2012, *Citizenship: Paul on Peace and Politics*, Winnipeg: CMU Press.

"From Retributive to Distributive Justice in Romans," *Direction*, 2015, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 43-58 (<http://www.directionjournal.org/44/1/from-retributive-to-restorative-justice.html>; last accessed October 28, 2016).

*Philippians (Believers Church Commentary)*, Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2016.