

Introduction

This book seeks to comprehend Paul's theology in the contexts of other cultures, more specifically a particular culture: postcolonial Christianity in Zimbabwe. This Christianity is not a stand-alone religion but a synthesis of Western and African cultures.¹ Missionaries and colonial forces in Zimbabwe during the colonial period (1890–1980) greatly overlooked the symbolic world of the Shona people and imposed a new culture on an already religious people. The Shona selectively and inventively appropriated parts of the colonial version of Christianity that missionaries offered them and then transformed it. One important element in that critical appropriation was the figure of Abraham. The way Shona Christians came to understand Abraham as an ancestor has important resonance with the way Paul originally sought to present Abraham in the context of an alternative ancestor myth.

I will argue that Paul's exegesis of the Genesis story in Romans 4 cannot be appreciated without taking into account the influence of the *Aeneid*—Virgil's Roman epic, meant to celebrate the religious and political foundations of Augustus (26 BCE–68 CE). I wish to use the interaction of Aeneas and Abraham traditions of Paul's time as an analogy for the growth of Christianity in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Africa.

Aeneas and Abraham were founding ancestors of their respective peoples, and yet no significant effort has been made to study Paul's engagement with the Roman Empire through his appropriation of Abraham as a spiritual ancestor of “all” faith people in Romans. In this case, Virgil's *Aeneid* and Paul's Epistle to the Romans have a dialogical theological relationship that illuminates the apostle's message among “Gentiles.”² Paul not only builds on an apologetic tradition in Hellenistic Judaism but also interacts with an ideological trend in early Roman imperialism, which found in the tradition of Aeneas a basis for reconciling Greeks and Romans. Therefore, Paul's portrayal of Abraham as an ancestor of Jews and Greeks alike is an ideological construct analogous to the propaganda of the Augustan age (26 BCE–68 CE), with which his Roman audience would have been familiar. Yet, by asserting that Abraham the Jew, rather than Aeneas the Roman, was the ancestor of the people of faith (*fides*), Paul constructs a liberating counter-ideology, the effect of which was to subvert the basis of Roman power. Hence, a conscious consideration of the role of ancestors in

Zimbabwe finds its warrant in Paul's construction of Abraham as a new spiritual ancestor against the background of Roman imperial politics.³

This book employs sociohistorical methods to illuminate Paul's creative construction of Abraham as a spiritual ancestor in the Epistle to the Romans, arguing that Romans cannot be understood apart from the imperial age of Augustus. Through the lens of postcolonial biblical interpretation, the project will also seek to demonstrate the colonial and postcolonial reinvention of African Christianity.

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Biblical interpretation and exegesis, especially of Paul's letters, must take into consideration people's cultural worldviews, commitments, and experiences. The Augustan revolution, through which Paul's audience lived, was indeed a change in religious, political, and social structures. Cultural interpretation acknowledges that all expressions of Christianity are culturally specific. Similarly, the Roman poet Virgil and the Roman historian Dionysius, on one hand, and the Jewish philosopher Philo and the Jewish historian Josephus, on the other, were all poised to preserve the traditions of their different cultures. Paul, who was a Jew by birth, found himself caught in the contest of the two cultures, and to ignore them would have meant an oversight in his apostleship. So he creatively constructed Abraham in ways that would invite all cultures into the gospel of Jesus Christ. New Testament scholars in the twenty-first century have not yet paid sufficient attention to the intertextuality of Paul's believing audience. In the age of Augustus, religion, power, and politics were inseparable. Paul's ministry was thus confronted with a worldview that required creative approaches.

In many respects, all Christian beliefs, practices, and views of Scripture are embodied or embedded in the interests and dynamics of a particular culture. Culture embodies those moral, ethical, and aesthetic values—the set of spiritual lenses through which people identify both themselves in the universe and their sense of particularity as members of the family of God.⁴ On the basis of social-historical investigations of texts, I argue that Paul puts forth a new definition of God for a multiethnic humanity, thus making a postcolonial reading of Romans possible. Paradoxically, Paul depicts Abraham's faith over and against his works, thus engaging Israel's first patriarch in a decidedly new way.⁵ In a similar way, Greek and Roman writers of the first century BCE (namely, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Virgil, and Livy) used Aeneas as a vehicle of Augustan propaganda.

Paul positively and creatively uses the dominant symbols of his day to affirm cultural pluralism and value diversity. Interacting with Mediterranean culture, Paul reinterprets Abraham as the cross-cultural spiritual ancestor of *all* faith people. What Paul does is to counter the dominant theology of the Julio-Claudian family, which was firmly established in the ideology of the ruling elite and the Caesar religion.⁶ Thus Paul's appropriation of Abraham as an ancestor of all people suggests to the global community that all traditions can participate in the interpretative process, in which the uniqueness of the other is differentiated, affirmed, and esteemed, while the commonalities of all are identified, shared, and celebrated. In other words, what we find in the Epistle to the Romans is an affirmation of "all" ethnic traditions and an open door for "all" cultures to appropriate the ancestry of Abraham in diversified ways.

As a New Testament theologian, I am concerned with the contextual understanding of Romans and with the cultural construction of the letter's audience in the context of the appropriation of Aeneas as an ancestor of Greeks and Romans. In this regard, the works of Virgil and Dionysius will aid in illumination of Paul's response to the Augustan era. That contextual interpretation will consequently also assist readers to appreciate how the figure of Abraham was adapted and adopted in Africa. As a cross-cultural reader, I recognize the deep need to delineate the complexity of cultural context so that hermeneutical interpretations can be appropriately conveyed as contexts change.

The Aeneas-Abraham paradigm employed in this book is a new discovery born out of my engagement and fascination with the *Aeneid*. In the process of studying the *Aeneid*, I discovered that the connection fits the experiences of African Christians in postcolonial Africa. There is no doubt that the recipients of Paul's Letter to the Romans were familiar with the age of Augustus, especially its ideological stance regarding Aeneas as an ancestor of Greeks and Romans. The language, metaphors, and images Paul uses in Romans were not new to Romans but were present in public buildings in and around their city.⁷

METHODOLOGY

Artifacts, coins, images, songs, inscriptions, tombstone epitaphs/poems, and histories from the ancient Greco-Roman and the Mediterranean world are relevant in Pauline commentaries and exegeses. As a postcolonial Bible interpreter, my focus is on bridging the world of the Greco-Roman Empire with the experiences of colonial and postcolonial African Christians. Paul actively appropriates aspects of the *Aeneid* story and makes it central to his Jesus

story. That creative action out of a situation of encounter and collision between cultures is a point of solid comparison and analogy between Paul and African experience. Thus a sociohistorical approach is fitting in illuminating the new that was born from the encounter between cultures.

GOAL OF THIS PROJECT

Using the Greco-Roman context of ancestors, heroes, and founders, I will situate Paul and his audience within the intertwined religion, politics, and power structures of the Augustan period. The Augustan period was defined by imperial rule, and religion played a sanctioning role in authenticating the ideology of the empire. Religion and control of all life was in many respects the foundation of social dominance by the ruling elite. The purposes of this work are, first, to establish an integration of the ancient Greco-Roman Empire with New Testament interpretations of Paul's theology in Romans and, second and consequently, to assist people in appreciating the complex experiences of African Christians in their encounter with colonialism. The synthesis of colonialism and African culture gave birth to postcolonial Christianity. In this colonial collision and encounter, Africans, like people in the Greco-Roman world, found Paul to be a theological dialogue partner in areas of ancestry, power, and the preservation of identity.

ORGANIZATION

Chapter 1 is in part autobiographical; it also focuses on the arrival of British missionaries and their perception of African culture. The perception of both colonizers and missionaries is elaborated in order to assist readers to see the complex relationship between Africans and Westerners. European colonialists and missionaries projected themselves as champions of Christian virtue and educators of human values. Their aim then was to educate, evangelize, and produce an African who would be subordinate to the teachings of the Western culture.

Chapter 2 will focus on religious and cultural configurations and an intense engagement between African religion and missionary teachings. In this chapter, colonial and missionary education will be investigated. The study will demonstrate that education, especially "moral and religious education," whether in public or missionary schools, became the incubator of African Christianity.⁸

Chapter 3 identifies postcolonial Christianity in relation to its encounter with Paul, through colonialism, as a theological dialogue partner. Paul's theological argument in Rom. 4:1-25 and the way Africans appropriated and

engaged with his message of the gospel of Jesus Christ will be explored as a period not only of synthesis but also of antisynthesis, leading to the birth of an authentic African Christianity. Africans appropriated from Paul's gospel a new understanding of Jesus, of which Paul is the first witness to faith in Jesus Christ.

Chapter 4 will focus on the nature of postcolonial Christianity as African multiethnic Christianity, whose identity is both African and Christian, with a renewed understanding of the role, place, and function of ancestors. Here the study will demonstrate the process and nature of African Shona Christianity's adaptation, faith, and spirituality.

The fifth chapter will offer the argument that the Shona people, in their process of adaptation, already felt an affinity for Paul's idea of ancestry. Here the study will focus on Aeneas and Abraham. The Shona people creatively appropriated selected aspects of Euro-American Christianity in their religion. Paul did the same thing in his Greco-Roman context, and Western New Testament scholars, as those inhabiting the dominant colonial culture, have not seen this adequately. Indeed, the experience of colonization helped Shona Christians to recognize Paul's appropriation of Abraham in the context of the Roman Empire and to counter the ideology of the Julio-Claudian family.

The conclusion summarizes the importance of the Aeneas-Abraham paradigm in the exegesis of Paul's Epistle to the Romans. The comparison between Aeneas and Paul powerfully assists readers to appreciate both Paul's appropriation of the Aeneas story and the ways through which he utilizes it to creatively construct Abraham as a spiritual ancestor, consequently authenticating Christian faith.

This is a powerful theological discovery, for it shows that Paul prefigures exactly what the Shona people did. Paul does not just walk onto the scene arguing for Abraham as an ancestor of Jews, but he selectively appropriates aspects of the *Aeneid* biography and makes it central to his Jesus story. That creative action out of a situation of encounter and collision between cultures is a point of solid comparison and analogy between Paul and Shona Christian experience.

Notes

1. The term *culture* in this work refers to an entire way of life as it pertains to an encounter between Western culture(s) and African traditional religion. Culture encompasses everything that distinguishes one group from others, including social habits and institutions, rituals, artifacts, categorical schemes, beliefs, and values.

2. This particular view is dealt with minimally in Neil Elliot, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of the Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 121–38; David R.

Wallace, *The Gospel of God: Rome as Paul's Aenied* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008), 38–117; and John L. White, *The Apostle of God: Paul and the Promise of Abraham* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 229–36. My discovery is independent of all these Western New Testament scholars because it is one born from a synthesis and antisyntesis between missionary faith and African indigenous religion. The appropriation of Abraham was in synch with the religious quests in African spirituality and faith.

3. J. R. Harrison, “Paul, Eschatology and the Augustan Age of Grace,” *TynBul* 50 (1999): 79–91, offers the same worldview on the encounter between Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures in Rom. 5:12–21 and 8:18–39.

4. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers, 1986), 14–15.

5. See Wolfgang Stegemann, “The Emergence of God’s New People: The Beginnings of Christianity Reconsidered,” *HTS Theological Studies/Teologiese Studies* 62, no. 1 (2006): 23–40 (<http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/346>), who argues that “unlike the many other ancient peoples, the Christianoi as God’s people share no common genealogical descent from a common ancestor. Instead, they were connected through fictive kinship, which means that they belong to the household of God (*familia dei*) and ultimately traced their birth to and from God (baptism as symbolic [re-]birth)” (also published in *Annali di storia dell’ esegesi: Come e nato il Cristianesimo?* 21, no. 2 [Centro Italiano di Studi Superiori delle Religioni, 2004]: 497–615). See also Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 268–322.

6. Dieter Georgi, “Paul” (unpublished manuscript, 2003), 40–41.

7. *Res Gestae* 11.12–13. See P. A. Brunt and J. M. Moore, eds., *Res Gestae Divi Augusti: The Achievements of the Divine Augustus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

8. “Moral and religious education” is used in this book to refer ways cultural imperialism sought to displace and suppress African traditional religion.