

## Preface

For issues surrounding religion, morality, and politics, Paul of Tarsus is one of the most widely quoted and influential figures in Western civilization—inside and outside of professional theological circles, academic biblical studies, and so-called organized religion. Half of the canonical New Testament is attributed to this ancient man, dead for almost two millennia. Anything but dead, his texts have been deployed forcefully, in different historical moments, to tell Christians to submit to the government at all costs, slaves to obey their masters, Jews that they no longer are God’s chosen people, women that they should be subordinate to men, and those with partners of the same sex that their relationships are unnatural. Paul is a model for religious conversion and zealous exclusion. He has provided the premier scriptural prooftexts for sexual abstinence, and portions of his letters (“love is patient, love is kind . . .”) are commonly used in American heterosexual marriage rituals. Some love Paul, some hate him, and hardly anyone is neutral about him. Misogynist, homophobic, racist, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, elitist—Paul seems to serve as a mirror for our own anxieties about religion, politics, domination, and justice.

In light of such a controversial and deeply embedded cultural legacy, this book seeks to re-imagine Paul’s consciousness and communities as critically liberationist in orientation and transformative in potential. Given the particular context in which I currently write—that is, a post-9/11 United States fighting a war in Iraq and on terror with explicit imperial overtones, a United States whose cultural machinery celebrates diversity while creating and managing diverse social identities that are safe for mass consumption, a United States whose public equates religion largely with certain stripes of fundamentalist-leaning, Bible-believing Christianity, a United States wherein deep divisions about sex and power inevitably refer to “what the Bible says”—I submit that it is crucial to re-read, re-situate, and re-imagine the Apostle Paul, his life, his work, and his world. Readings of Paul sit at the center of many contemporary debates appealing to biblical texts. Often he serves as a proverbial stumbling block in a variety of situations. It may be the case that many perspectives can be articulated, but authority rests with Paul, and whoever is thought to be on Paul’s good side occupies a preferable moral stance. However, those in marginalized social positions usually lose, as the perceived victims and casualties of what are asserted as Paul’s static rhetorical pronouncements and platitudes. If this is indeed the case, is re-imagining Paul even possible or desirable, given all of the ideological energy and

weight given to his supposed pro-hierarchical, status-quo-obsessed, anti-liberation stance on any number of issues? Why not just forget about him or at least refuse to engage those who infuse his texts with seemingly irresistible clout? Why not just admit defeat about Paul and move on?

This book does not admit defeat about Paul, even as it asserts that Paul labored among those who were considered defeated. One critical consideration is: Who can claim Paul as authoritative? Another is: With whom does Paul side? I re-imagine Paul as occupying a vulnerable, subversive social position of solidarity among others and as part of a useable past for historically dominated and marginalized peoples in the present. Such attention to the past is not in the service of what some might dismiss as a rehabilitation of Paul and old Pauline hierarchies. I contend that it is a critical re-reading of Paul, and not the refusal to read Paul, that is actually a more potent tool for holding dominant and oppressive interpretations of Paul accountable for injustices. Blaming Paul for various tenacious damages takes some of the weight off of our shoulders for unfortunate histories of Pauline interpretation, particularly around contemporary political issues, where marginalized peoples are made more so. Building what seems unimaginable at this contemporary juncture—a more just human and earth community—is largely why I attempt to re-imagine Paul.

Rethinking Paul as a political figure interested in a more just world order has been a much-deliberated topic among New Testament scholars for some time. In the broadest possible sense, I place this work alongside recent scholarship that has rediscovered the Roman Empire as a world to which Paul responds. However, I depart from this stream of scholarship in two significant ways. First, emergent empire-critical scholarly engagement of Paul has, as far as I know, done very little to take related controversies about gender, race, and sexuality seriously. Though Paul could be called a hero of anti-imperial approaches, ideas about how such an approach changes the way we see his concerns as related to gender, race, and sexuality have been generally overlooked beyond affirmations of perceived misogyny and homophobia and the affirmation that it is unfortunate he thought in these terms. This recent paradigm shift in New Testament scholarship from uncritical religion to the study of empire and politics has really missed the mark on the gendered, sexualized, and racialized texture of dominant ideology. The present work seeks to begin to fill this significant gap.

The second way that I depart from empire-critical approaches is in my reading of visual representation as part of what I call a gender-critical re-imagination. More than illustrations of texts, I position images as that which can be read and critically engaged. I am not involved in the formal identification and classification of art; I am interested in visual communication as a part of the world Paul inhabited, part of the readable evidence available to us. Moreover, images reveal the complex interconnectivity of status, race, gender, and sexuality in a way that some of the ancient texts with which scholars are familiar do not. However, as I hope my book shows, a realignment of the primary sources available to us, and reading literary

representations through the lens of these complex images, reveals patterns and suggestions that previously we have not noticed or fully understood.

Throughout this book I ask numerous questions in the service of re-imagining Paul. At the center is what seems like an innocent exegetical inquiry. Who are the Gentiles to whom Paul claims he is sent? It is the case that the Gentiles are the “others” of the New Testament’s Jewish orientation and of the traumatic memory of Israel’s history as a minority people forever under threat of danger from foreign empires. However, is the binary opposition maintained between Jews and Gentiles still tenable when Paul’s Roman imperial context is brought to bear on these categories? In some ways, yes, but I argue that the Gentiles are also the others to the Romans, whose ideological metanarrative structured the world at Paul’s time and within which the texts that eventually became the New Testament were fully embedded. They are not the theological non-Jews or Christians defined solely by their non-Israelite status or religion but the theo-political others who should inevitably be defeated and subordinated—according to the will of the gods—as a matter of Roman destiny.

The identity and semiotic properties of the Gentiles, as well as Paul’s relationship to them in his Roman imperial context, constitutes a thoroughgoing challenge to, as well as path toward, re-imagining Paul. As a social and theological category, the Gentiles are neither self-evident nor simplistic. In this book’s opening chapter I situate the problem of Paul and the Gentiles as well as outline an alternative, non-idealist, methodological shift that I call gender-critical re-imagination. The remaining chapters proceed as follows:

Chapters 2 and 3 are concerned with a realignment of the primary sources of Paul’s context; both concern an analysis of what I call the fate of the nations in Roman imperial ideology. Chapter 2 considers Roman imperial visual representation as the most graphic way to see how power relationships and hierarchy operate in the Roman imperial world. I elaborate on Roman imperial visual representation as a complementary semantic system to New Testament texts, in this case Pauline literature. Attention to Roman imperial visual representation contributes profoundly to a gender-critical re-imagination of Paul as apostle to the defeated nations. In particular, the hierarchical construct “Roman is to nation as male is to female” is strikingly vivid. I choose one pattern that has been underestimated in New Testament studies: the personification of defeated peoples as racially distinct female bodies that are displayed publicly in series and called nations. I choose only a few examples to discuss. What is clear from the visual representation that is not so clear in the texts is that the Jews/Judeans are represented as occupying the same ideological space as other conquered enemy peoples and also are the most likely to be personified as a woman’s body.

The primary visual sources I discuss in chapter 2 are linked to the textual sources in chapter 3. This chapter concerns literary representation of the nations in relation to Romans. Through analysis of texts displaying what I call the pre-destination, justification, and eternalization of Roman conquest and universal

domination, I provide a richer context as part of a gender-critical re-imagination of Paul as apostle to the defeated nations. I show that in literary representation, the Romans express a construct of inevitable conquest in terms of the same hierarchical power relationships as in visual representation: Roman is to nation as male is to female. Conquest is portrayed as a penetrative, sexual act that sows the seeds of a fertile Roman future. As such, Romans “write” themselves as the masculine master race and the conquered as the feminine inferior races. From a Roman perspective, the nation of the Jews is a particularly pernicious people among many, if not all, of the defeated nations. Therefore, a power differential of interest to New Testament studies should shift from *Jews* over against *other nations* to *Romans* over against *all the nations including Jews*.

Chapter 4 begins a gender-critical re-imagination of Paul as apostle to the defeated nations, focusing on a re-reading of Galatians. I propose that Paul changes both his self-presentation (from conqueror to conquered, from strong penetrating male to weak penetrated female, and to anguished, painful, creative mother) and self-in-relation to all the nations under Roman rule. The gendered and racial implications of this maneuver are that Paul operates on the ground, from a non-elite perspective. His mission is to unite the peoples defined and delimited by Roman conquest through transgressing and subverting the boundaries of identity and association established for them by Roman imperial ideology and often replicated in the self-definition of the conquered. Both transgression and subversion among the nations are accomplished through reconciliatory solidarity and unity under the umbrella of the God of Israel, who promises that all nations will be blessed in Abraham and ultimately gathered together in Zion. Such a rhetoric, which somehow genealogically pits Mother Zion (Sarah) against *pater patriae* (Caesar), is amplified by a transformed “mother Paul” in the only allegory present in the New Testament canon: the Sarah and Hagar allegory in Galatians 4:21—5:1. I argue that, in light of my consideration of Roman imperial ideology of conquest of all the nations, this allegory is among the most transparent literary evidence we have of Paul’s embeddedness in both Jewish and Roman contexts. Stemming from this dual embeddedness is an alternative fate of the nations according to Pauline imagination.

Chapter 5 includes concluding observations and raises possible implications and trajectories for this study, in particular, as well as more generally for the methodological shift I propose. I give special attention to the possibilities for re-reading and re-imagining Paul from the margins around contemporary political issues. Here, I again consider the questions of solidarity and universalism that have been the site of contestation in Pauline studies.

The search for a critical re-imagination of Paul is also the search, then, for a viable future, a future that does not stop with acceptance and tolerance for the marginalized. It is the hope for another world and the excavation of a New Testament that gives a glimpse at hope for that world. Consciousness-raising and subversive action among the defeated are processes at the core of Paul’s agenda. In this sense, the Gentiles/nations are the most significant others in the New Testament,

in fact in the Bible as a whole. Theologically, embracing the nations in a different relationship—solidarity, not assimilation—is not a measure of obedience to certain law constructs. It is a reactivation of the good news of and with the impoverished, the poor, the others: those who are the subjects, not objects, of biblical consciousness. By going to the defeated nations and meeting them where they are—in the dominated places all over Roman territory—Paul recognizes their humanity in a context that has chronic dehumanization as divine mandate. In our own context of chronic dehumanization orchestrated by divinely ordained empire, and in our own acceptance of its terms in many subtle and often undetected ways, I ask us to be challenged again and again by Pauline imagination.