

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Paul's Relevance Today

In this book I consider, almost twenty centuries later, the relevance of the counter-hegemonic Pauline proposal. What relevance could Paul have today, and what should our reading of him look like? In what way today, in very different historical circumstances, is this “recovery” of the counterhegemonic value of Pauline symbolism still valid? This question has more answers today than when I first asked it of myself twenty years ago in my academic work because I have found persons who have asked the same question, even outside of the Christian realm. I believe that historical circumstances have made it current. The appearance of various works of political philosophers who study Paul—all of them appearing after the time I wrote my original thesis—seems to answer the question of the fertility of Paul’s political thought for today positively.

These positive answers have appeared because the shape that our world has taken, especially since the fall of the Soviet Union (a year after I presented my original thesis), can be characterized as “empire.”¹

The concept of Empire is presented as a global concert under the direction of a single conductor, a unitary power that maintains the social peace and produces its ethical truths. And in order to achieve these ends, the single power is given the necessary force to conduct, when necessary, “just wars” at the borders against the barbarians and internally against the rebellious . . . Empire exhausts historical time, suspends history, and summons the past and future within its own ethical order. In other words, Empire presents its order as permanent, eternal, and necessary.²

Therefore, the symbolic Pauline world of confrontation against the Roman Empire appears stronger, more decisive, and of more value today than in Paul’s day and than when I first wrote. As a matter of fact, some current political philosophers have turned to Paul as a source of reflection in the midst of a “postmodern empire.”³

How should we read Paul in such a context? Can a symbolic world created almost two thousand years ago to confront one empire be recovered with validity for today in the midst of a new, globalizing empire? Is there any value in proposing a new political reading of Paul in this sense, or should we resign ourselves to a “theological purity” that does not interfere with worldly issues, as achieved by certain Pauline exegesis of the last centuries? These are questions that go beyond the framework of personal elaboration and must be posed, if they prove to be productive, for discussion in the Christian community and beyond it. These questions cannot be resolved only in discussion but also in praxis. That is to say, the question of Paul’s relevance

goes beyond doctrinal discussions: it demands a hermeneutical circle with the active participation of all the members of the community of faith, not just the educated ones, and finds completion in an action that transforms the social, political, and economic reality in which we move. The relevance of our interpretation of Paul will depend on its capacity to help promote and contribute to this discussion and to demonstrate its relevance in a praxis that creates alternatives to the imperial mode in which we now live.

In this undertaking we have to avoid facile correspondences such as seeing the Roman Empire in today's empires, as if history had not modified anything. Equating the two would be to deny our own reality and the history of the Gentile, Pauline church of the year 50 and would turn the latter into a "model" for churches in the third world. If the "counterhegemonic faith" of the artisans of Thessalonica and the ideas Paul articulated as their "organic intellectual"—about which more below—are still relevant, then they are relevant across a historical distance from our time, with requisite mediations. History has passed by. Paul died without seeing the *parousia* he hoped for.

However, the empire—being an empire—is not the only thing that is different; there are other moments and technologies. The situation of Christianity has changed as well: the political-military leadership of the church has become concrete at different times and places, in real regimes, with diverse strategies and different operations. These historical materializations of the Christian church are, indeed, different from those Paul announced. Even his message, which according to the present work appears as counterhegemonic, has been implemented in hegemonic ways throughout these last eighteen centuries. And from that history there is no turning back. We may analyze, explain, and interpret that history, but we cannot go back to an ideal zero point. We have to bear it, with its contradictions and historical concretions, in our successive quests to make the symbolic Christian worldview something meaningful for today, especially if we want to make of it an alternative to the new imperial ideologies, which have also been fed by a certain Christian history and continue to use it to justify themselves and their propaganda.

This discussion, that history, and those writings are decisive for the inhabitants of the present century who still value as fundamental those events in the first years of the Roman Principate that formed the origin of what we still call "the faith in Jesus, the Messiah." Interpreting Paul is a requirement for those of us who still read Paul's letters with the vision of those "beloved brothers and sisters of God" of Thessalonica. The meaning these texts carry is at the root of our own notion of the world. For that reason, we cannot but recover them as guiding texts for a project in which we encounter our brothers and sisters in hope. The hermeneutical task is this: to discover the meaning of a shared history, a history inscribed in texts but that exceeds the texts themselves, because it has been transmitted by and takes place in a community that is heir to the first community that created that history with its own life. Biblical hermeneutics certainly rests on the polysemy of texts, but in our case it rests also on the acknowledgment of the same guiding axis of faith that, throughout history, has taken risks in interpreting those texts. Today we read the texts of the intellectuals who nourished the ideological matrix of the Roman Empire—Virgil, Musonius Rufus, Suetonius, Pliny, Cicero, or Seneca—to understand the cultural dynamics, the ideological struggles, and the conceptualizations that ruled in the formation of that empire. But "the cultural community" of the ruling class of the Roman Empire has disappeared. We also read the texts of Paul today,

but within communities that sustain the faith of Paul. Within those communities, we dispute the value and meaning of those symbols, for ourselves and for those outside, in what has been called “the battle for meanings,”⁴ and that struggle becomes the guide of our faith and action. That is the difference. At some point, that original community decided, through mechanisms we are not going to judge now, that those texts and not others—which somehow contained data that made sense to their faith and that arose during “the stage of gestation”—were their normative texts.

Some anthropologists say that human beings are a product of “fetalization”: that being born “prematurely” (compared to the degree of development that other higher species reach in their period of gestation) has generated the anatomic and cultural forms that allowed our differentiation and our own dynamic adaptation. Being born “fetalized” gives humans the flexibility that allows us to go beyond mere repetition of former generations; our development comes to completion (or, sadly, fails to do so) because we are able to adapt to the external environment into which we are born.

The same thing happens with our scriptures, especially in the case of the New Testament. The New Testament constitutes a “fetalization” of the Christian message, which allows us to read it and develop it anew in each context. It presents an open possibility for diverse developments to arise. However, as has been said, we cannot afford to ignore other developments that have permeated the reading of these texts. This tension between the history of interpretation and the possibility of going back to the sources is what keeps biblical hermeneutics alive.

Thus when “the tradition” and “the magisterium” unilaterally appropriate the text for themselves and develop its meaning in one direction and make that direction normative, such appropriation becomes “anticanonical,” since the magisterium sets strong limits and maintains hierarchies in a community that was born, if the present thesis holds some truth, differentiating itself from the hierarchies and forms of appropriation of its own time. This should not surprise us. Hierarchies and delimitations are mechanisms which the dominant sectors use to appropriate—socially and ecclesiastically—the “means of symbolic production” that is the New Testament.⁵ Our effort, in contrast, is to be “canonical”: to recover the biblical material as a “fetal” registry, flexible and open, as a community space, as part of a dialogue that opens the text as common possession. Our effort is to open the text again as a way of recovering it for the subordinate classes and dominated peoples on whose experience that text was constructed, and for the struggles that continue to give life to those hopes today: in other words, to socialize the text.

We must not ignore the history of the Christian community (or, better, communities), with its historical swings, its proposed appropriations by the most powerful, and the partial recoveries of many of its most inspired prophets. However, we want to be able to interpret the church critically, on the basis of its foundational actions and of the challenges of the present time. It thus makes sense to speak of an “updating” in which both our present reality and history are a part. In this sense, we always find ourselves at a “Pauline juncture.” We are heirs of a tradition that has nourished and situated us in the world (just as Paul was situated in part within his Israelite origin), but that tradition can be valid only as long as we break the continuity with a new meaning born out of contemporary experience, which makes that tradition anachronistic. Paul recognizes that he is Jewish; he laments on behalf of his Jewish brothers and sisters (Rom. 9:1-4);

he uses the scriptures that he received as a legacy from Israel and leans on them. But at the same time, he breaks that faithfulness because of his encounter with a new meaning, abdicates the rituals of Judaism, and reformulates its texts under a new light. The memory of the particular must be submitted to the construction of something new, to the emergence of a new subject, a “new creation.”

Our situation is Pauline, then, and simultaneously it is not. The canonical text, the letter we have studied, was written, as I will indicate below, at a time in which the lower classes had not developed a clear consciousness or the analytical tools that would have allowed them to evaluate the mechanisms causing their submission. Part of our goal (in this and other writings) has been to show that the emerging community of believers created a symbolic world that was largely able to challenge that submission in accordance with the real historical circumstances in which it was born. This included a theology and ethics that were constructed as instruments of confrontation with the ideologies of domination and oppression. And this community did so with the elements at its disposal. The consciousness of class of the modern type, the struggles and theories of gender, the understanding of the mechanisms behind prejudice, and the scientific knowledge of the political-ideological mechanisms of domination were not available to them; yet Paul, with all his ambiguities, was able to advance to the place where he could defy these dynamics, at least within that new reality he calls “in Christ.”

And yet things have changed. The subordinate classes, sectors, and peoples today, with a greater consciousness of the mechanisms that cause their submission, have created the tools of analysis and of struggle that, although imperfect and necessarily improvable, have made effective social and political movements possible. However, our “third world” has not yet found ways to destroy fully the mechanisms that cause the exploitation, discrimination, and oppression to which our peoples are doomed in both grand and daily history. Now it is possible to incorporate new analytical elements and other forms of consciousness from the facts of our own history. My question, in this case, has to do with the value a reading like the one I present here might have in the formation of a symbolic, counterhegemonic worldview that, alongside other instruments, proves to be efficient in this struggle.

Some experiences seem to suggest that, despite their partial and present frustrations, this path is valid. In my original thesis I sought to follow this path. This is still a goal more than twenty years later. It is an attempt to demonstrate the “canonicity” of a particular, third-world, anti-imperialist reading of the biblical text, even of very controversial texts such as Paul’s. It is encouraging to see how in recent years the issue of imperialism has resurfaced as a political theme and as an object of study in biblical scholarship. I recognize as something positive that this issue, which has circulated in biblical studies for many years in Latin America, is now part of the reflections of some prestigious biblical scholars in the “first world.”⁶

The Relevance of a Necessary Theme

After reviewing some of the books and journal articles that have recently appeared on the Pauline Epistles and 1 Thessalonians specifically, I have seen four major trends.

Contributions by More "Traditional" Exegesis and Theology

By "traditional" exegesis and theology, I mean the framework imposed mainly by historical-critical methods. Outside of certain particular discussions about the authorship of 2 Thessalonians and its relation to 1 Thessalonians, these studies have focused mainly on analyses of the text, stopping at the examination of some isolated elements of the two letters. Close to this tendency, other authors have reworked the "concepts" of Pauline theology in terms of classical theology.

Although there have been elements in these studies that have enriched the reading of Paul's letters and theology, we cannot point out anything significant in recent times with specific regard to 1 Thessalonians. Some discussions tend to recur, among which we can mention, for instance, whether 1 Thess. 2:7 should read *ēpioi* or *nēpioi*, the meaning of *skeuos* in 1 Thess. 4:4, or whether 1 Thess. 2:13-16 is a later interpolation or a sample of a genuine anti-Jewish sentiment in Paul or early Christianity.⁷ These debates have not brought greater clarity on these or other topics and seem repeatedly to exchange arguments one way or another without actually settling, in any of the cases, the issues in a definitive manner.

Very close to this line of discussion, we have studies on Pauline theology that revolve around the old themes of justification or Paul's Christology and efforts to link these to the life of Paul. I will not comment on these issues, which tend to be very repetitive in their arguments, even when scholars seek to present them as innovations. Generally, these studies are filled with academic jargon and tend to be books that talk about other books.

A good book within this category, which seeks to break away from the rigid scheme of similar studies, is *Paul: A Critical Life*, by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor. It is an attempt to show that the theological issues that appear in the Pauline Letters arise from his pastoral practice. This is a common, growing issue in studies about Paul,⁸ but Murphy O'Connor's book presents the issue in an interesting manner and also gives us a good summary of other studies. He fails, however, to move totally away from "the ecclesiastical discipline" traditionally imposed on studies about Paul, and he ends up getting caught up in the issue of Paul the theologian without giving too much room for the social and political implications of his ministry.

Specific commentaries on 1 Thessalonians (which are generally linked to 2 Thessalonians) do not contribute too much that is new either. In writing the commentaries on these letters in the *Comentario Bíblico Latinoamericano*,⁹ I was able to perceive for myself the limitations the genre imposes on developing arguments that go beyond analyses "from pericope to pericope" or "verse by verse." Yeo Khiok-khng, writing in the *Global Bible Commentary*,¹⁰ tries to present a more contextual interpretation of 1 Thessalonians, one I find in line with my own thesis, and reaffirms the contrast between the emerging Christian fraternity and the imperial "outside" as a contrast between culturally and politically contrasting spaces; but he does not end too far from the traditional themes, especially in his reading of "reconciliation." The work of Beverly Roberts Gaventa is valuable, too,¹¹ since her comments successfully include some observations about the letter, stressing its link with the social and political world of its time, although they must follow an editorial line that does not allow much space for in-depth analysis.

Among the studies done on Paul, Vincent Wimbush's work *Paul, the Worldly Ascetic* (1987) is worth mentioning. Although this work focuses on only one chapter of 1 Corinthians, its contribution may be significant for us. Relying on historical-critical methods and making special use of the history of (biblical and Greek) traditions and philology, Wimbush seeks to show how Paul could combine two terms that at first appear antagonistic: *asceticism* and *worldly*. He shows that Paul takes very seriously the world he lives in but, at the same time, relativizes it in light of eschatological conduct, highlighting the value of the phrase "as if not" (*hōs mē*)—something we will also see in other authors such as Giorgio Agamben. This argument allows Wimbush to conclude: "Since early Christianity's *redefinition* and *restructuring* of kinship ties represented a radical allegiance, encompassing the totality of life, it affected the most serious (though subtle) challenge to the Empire. In effect, it took 'the heart' out of the Empire not only in its radical allegiance to another power, but also in its creation of whole new basic units of social existence—the Christian *oikos*."¹²

Another interesting work is Robert Jewett's book *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (1986). Although his commentary is an exhaustive historical-critical analysis of the letter and in this sense remains within a well-known scheme (with precise, important contributions), Jewett exceeds that scheme when he tries to link the study of Pauline eschatology with the expectations of a "popular religion" in Thessalonica, especially with the cults of the Dioscuri and the Delphian Cabiri and their mysteries. However, the language of "millennialism," totally alien to Pauline thought and to these cults alike, naturally betrays Jewett when he associates, in typical American style, apocalypticism with millennialism (see the excursus after chapter 13, below).

New Interdisciplinary Contributions

Some other studies view early Christianity and particularly Paul and his literary production on the basis of analyses from other scientific fields. In these studies, biblical scholars refresh their studies by adopting theories (especially from the social sciences) and drawing nourishment from new categories. Anthropology seems to be the discipline that has contributed the most in recent times.

The studies mentioned in the previous section encompass both the world of Paul in its cultural context and the extension of Pauline hermeneutics to "receiving" cultures today. The number of scholars who study the latter idea is more limited. For instance, in another work, *Paul: Apostle to America*, Robert Jewett studies the impact and possibilities of a rereading of Paul in North American society. Another study that follows this line is *Cross-Cultural Paul*, written by Charles H. Cosgrove, Yeo Khiok-Khng (K. K.), and Harold Weiss, in which several cultural scenarios for reading Pauline texts are proposed.

For our perspective, however, the analyses of Paul in his own cultural milieu have proven to be more productive. The studies in Jerome Neyrey, *Paul, in Other Words*, make some contributions here. Neyrey analyzes in depth the importance of the values of "honor and shame" and the competition for prestige in Mediterranean society. He adds a careful examination of Paul's cosmology, proposing a taxonomy of Pauline

symbols, and focuses on themes such as rituals, the image of the body, and purity and impurity. The fundamental deficiency of this approach, however, is that the cultural elements seem to be floating up in the air as products of a dynamic all their own and circulating without much contact with social, economic, and political realities. If certain rigid forms of structuralist Marxism used to assume the prevalence of economics over the cultural, that exaggeration cannot be corrected by ignoring the role that economic and political factors play in the construction of the cultural ethos of a society. Neyrey himself, at the end of his work, seems to acknowledge this limitation when, under the subtitle "An Incomplete Agenda,"¹³ he indicates that studying patron-client relations and the economics of kinship groups would be necessary to know how these elements affected Pauline communities. However, the imperial horizon is still far from his outlook.

We should also consider a reading of the theology of the cross in Paul, starting with the theories of René Girard, just as Robert Hamerton-Kelly tries to do.¹⁴ This view would no doubt bring a new and diverse political perspective to Pauline writings, although from another angle. It contributes to our vision in the sense that Paul's thought assumes an alternative logic to the violence and rivalry that have been imposed by others. However, Hamerton-Kelly's work focuses more on Paul's confrontation with the sacrificial cult of Second Temple Judaism than on the type of violence—both symbolic and real—imposed by the sacrificial theology of the empire. In just a single paragraph, Hamerton-Kelly leaves aside the whole theme of Roman participation in the death of Jesus to concentrate on the theme of the Jewish sacrificial religion, which he associates with the death of Jesus.¹⁵ It would have been preferable to examine in depth the Roman participation in the death of Jesus as well as the dynamics of death that the empire proposed in all its social relations, as exemplified and promoted in the social imagery generated by the circus and the fights among gladiators.¹⁶

Political Readings

Even closer to our perspective—which is fertilized with these arguments—are social readings of Paul, especially those that have recently focused on the issue of imperialism. In recent years, we have seen some works that have tried to situate Paul politically. Feminist critical readings of his writings or analyses of the use of his letters to justify slavery resulted in an "anti-Pauline" symptom. After all, accusations against Paul are not that new. Nietzsche already mistreated Paul extensively, although for other reasons! For his part, Karl Kautzky, in his *Origins and Foundations of Christianity*, now more than a century ago, indicated that Paul had been the traitor who "bourgeoisified" the peasant, revolutionary movement of Jesus.

In contrast to these anachronistic evaluations, some more elaborated studies have appeared that tend to balance out this view. Some feminist theologians, including Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in her now-classic work *In Memory of Her*, offered a critical revision of the above position, showing more consideration for the situation of Paul and his writings. Among us in Latin America, a similar effort came from the pen of Irene Foulkes, both in her *Problemas pastorales en Corinto*¹⁷ and in several articles on

this theme.¹⁸ Studies about Paul's relationship with slavery have been particularly significant in the communities of African descent in North America.¹⁹

In Latin America, the channel for studying "the political Paul" has been mainly in the journal *Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana (RIBLA)*, especially issue number 20, which I edited. Under the title *Pablo, militante de la fe*, the issue includes the reflections of several authors on the life, mission, and theology of Paul in his social and political dimensions. And since its appearance we have always regarded as a classic in Pauline theology Elsa Tamez's study of the doctrine of justification, *Contra toda condena* (ET *The Amnesty of Grace*).

Back in North America, in *Liberating Paul*, Neil Elliott studied the ways themes linked to Paul's letters have been used to justify the oppression of slaves and gender discrimination. In the second part of his book, he proceeded to read certain "liberating aspects" of Paul as he faces the empire, taking into account his apocalyptic theology. Elliott's research and conclusions coincide with much of what I point out here. The same is true of Richard Horsley's *Paul and Empire*, a collection of articles to which Horsley added his own contributions. Finally, a recent work by John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed, *In Search of Paul*, presents a study of the life and theology of Paul in his social and political context. The authors travel Paul's itinerary, providing abundant archaeological material to survey the places of the Pauline mission and the context of the imperial ideology with which he was confronted.

Recent Studies outside of the Theological Arena, Especially Political Philosophers

Finally, Paul has been the object of articles and contributions from self-confessed non-Christian philosophers who have approached Pauline thought as a challenge in our postmodern times. The names of Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Giorgio Agamben are prominent in this regard.

"The problem of how to build a community"—fired Žižek to another question—"is crucial today. I think that is why Agamben, Alain Badiou, and I are so interested in Paul, and we are all atheists. And what we see there is, indeed, a model of a new community."²⁰

This quotation from the well-known political philosopher Slavoj Žižek shows how today, outside of the theological world, the study of Paul as a social and political thinker has been recovered. In another interview Žižek says,

For both Paul and Lenin, the problem is the same: how to translate the revolution to a new positive order through new forms of politicization and even the most mundane things (marriage, sex). My problem is just this: the return to order.²¹

Žižek's declarations introduce us to another facet of studies of Paul today. Non-Christian philosophers and scholars are of course not the only ones who have made inroads into Pauline writings. With different motivations, Nietzsche and Heidegger, Freud and Lyotard, to name a few, have dealt with the apostle. But we concentrate on

the most recent ones because of the relevant links they have with post-Marxism, and we ponder the contributions of each (although in works that, with the exception of Agamben's, are exegetically less rigorous than the one I undertake here) and explore the ways they have contributed to our understanding and actualization of Paul's thought and action.

Badiou, The Universal Paul

If Žižek declares that he is interested in Paul as a "constructor of community," Alain Badiou²² explores Paul from a different location. He is interested in Paul's persona as a model of militancy, a militant of the truth. "If today I wish to retrace in a few pages the singularity of this connection in Paul, it is probably because there is currently a widespread search for a new militant figure—even if it takes the form of denying its possibility—called upon to succeed the one installed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the century, which can be said to have been that of the party militant."²³

However, this aspect of Paul's persona is not the only one that inclines Badiou to look in the apostle's direction. In his characterization of the world, the discursive relativism that fragments human reality into multiple particularities finds only an abstract universal in capital. How could we, then, reintroduce into history and politics a subject that is not simply the expression of those particularities, but a universal subject that aspires to recognize himself or herself as a carrier of a truth-event? Here Badiou discovers a distinctive facet of Pauline thinking, especially in his confrontation with the law, in the struggle of the subject with the law. Thus Badiou elaborates a universal subject, without particularisms, who in turn confronts an equally empty law.

The impact of Jesus' resurrection (which Badiou declares he does not believe in, although he cannot deny that it is a truth-event for Paul) transformed the life of the particular subject that Paul was and allowed him to construct a new subjectivity that did not conform to this world, according to Rom. 12:2, with which Badiou closes his reflection. Only the transformation that Paul suffered permitted him to break away from the rigidity of his previous formation and to begin the construction of a new subjectivity, the new creation in Christ. And these unexpected events constitute the value of history as well as its unpredictability. Badiou's book closes with a quotation from 1 Thess. 5:2: "For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." Although Badiou does not put it this way, Paul's words remove all trust in any imperial pretense of perpetuity.

To understand Badiou's position, it is necessary to acquaint ourselves with his dispute about knowledge and the truth. We cannot approach the development of this theme in detail here,²⁴ but we must understand that, for Badiou, truth is not linear or dialectical; it is not the outgrowth of any logic. The truth that constitutes a subject is not given in a person's being but along the lines of what happens. And what happens, as long as it confronts the subject, takes that subject out of the situation and turns him or her into a bearer of faithfulness with pretensions to eternity. In this light, the encounter with the resurrected one on the way to Damascus makes Paul a subject and a bearer of a newness of life, of the affirmation of life in the face of death, which is the resurrection.

It is not my objective to survey Badiou's work, or even his book about Paul (although I will make some references to it in the appropriate places), but to highlight

that his contribution liberates Paul from certain dogmatic, theological charges. In this sense, Badiou sees Paul as an “antiphilosopher” (and I would even add “antitheologian”) who does not seek to give in to the truth and who does not create a system of dogmas. (“Deuteropaulinism” will do that, and dogmatic theology will later do so even more radically.) On the contrary, Paul seeks to communicate a conviction (i.e., faith) or even better, a conversion, which is capable of creating subjects with a revolutionary capacity. He does not arrive at the truth through a rational process: the truth surprises him, presents itself to him unexpectedly, turns him into a subject, and obliges him to reformulate a subjectivity according to the new understanding of the world he grasps from this unexpected experience. This all means constructing a subjectivity capable of overcoming the life of the flesh and the law, which stand for death, and living “the new creation” in the spirit of the resurrected one—both options that manifest themselves in the militant ethics of today. That form of life—which becomes concrete, in Badiou’s interpretation, in love as the only subsisting law that transforms a subjective discourse into a militant action—is externalized and situated when the necessary particularities are repositioned in a *uni-versal* horizon (“one for all”). Faithfulness to this truth-event, persevering in it, is hope, which, in Badiou’s explanation, completes the Pauline triad of faith, love, and hope. This is, through Badiou’s eyes, the heart of Paul’s proposal.

The idea that history does not present itself as a linear succession of events, that what happens simply occurs as a surprise, as an irruption (which is the dynamics that stands behind an apocalyptic eschatology), will be, for 1 Thessalonians, an ever-present dimension. Badiou does not explore, however, that precisely that subjectivity (which I will call anti-imperial and emancipatory) is nourished by the apocalyptic expectation and impedes the immanent closure of history. Neither does Badiou present clearly the space of power that Paul has before him: the Roman Empire. Furthermore, Badiou removes Paul from the concrete political situation and throws him into a type of theoretical struggle that, although present in Paul, finds its incarnation, as I indicate later in my work, in a concrete confrontation with the practices and ways of the empire. Thus Badiou affirms that Paul is “a man who was particularly *proud* of his Roman citizenship” and that “‘the world’ that Paul declares has been crucified with Jesus is the Greek cosmos, the reassuring totality that allots places and orders thought to consent to those places . . .”²⁵ Here Badiou enters into an incongruence with his affirmation that he will limit himself to the letters that are undoubtedly original (although he omits Philemon), since in none of them—not even in the Pseudo-Pauline Letters—do we find any expression that would justify talking about Paul being proud of being a Roman citizen. This problem, as I will point out later, is found in all the philosophers we are analyzing. The political Paul reaches, in all of them, a level of abstraction that makes him very ineffective, politically speaking.

Žižek: The Fraud of Omnipotence

Slavoj Žižek fundamentally studies Paul in two of his works. The theme of the first one is the construction of Western subjectivity, and in it he dedicates a chapter to Badiou and to his reading of Paul, with an emphasis on an analysis of Romans 7.²⁶ In reality, the person who looms over both readings in the first book, both the reading of Paul and of

Badiou, is Jacques Lacan. Žižek is more interested in discussing Lacan's interpretations of Paul and Badiou's reading of the French psychoanalyst than in Paul himself.

He gives more detailed attention to Paul in the second book, *El títere y el enano* (ET *The Puppet and the Dwarf*),²⁷ in which he goes in depth into this theme, confronting what he considers to be the perverse core of Christianity. Nevertheless, his exploration of Paul's relevance for the political situation of the time of the Roman Empire is tangential. His reading of Paul again fundamentally relapses into a Lacanian interpretation of the love-law tension and, in this sense, becomes more abstract, more "universal," extemporal. Similar to Badiou, Žižek sees in Paul a committed fighter: "What we find in Paul is a commitment, an engaged position of struggle, an uncanny 'interpellation' beyond ideological interpellation, an interpellation which suspends the performative force of the 'normal' ideological interpellation that compels us to accept our determinate place within the socio-symbolic edifice."²⁸ However, in his work Žižek does not investigate how this specifically happens in Paul as a preacher, and what role this "position of struggle" played for the communities that formed Gentile Christianity in its specific context in the first century. After all, engaging in concrete struggles and confronting opposite forces, whether physical or symbolic, is what a committed fighter does.

This does not mean that taking advantage of some of Žižek's conclusions will not enrich a study of what Paul meant in his own context. The Slovenian philosopher well highlights how Paul constructs a distinctive dimension of love, which leads Žižek to affirm that "only a lacking, vulnerable being is capable of love: the ultimate mystery of love, therefore, is that incompleteness is, in a way, higher than completion."²⁹ One would then have to ask how it is possible to say that "God is love." Žižek points out that the precisely distinctive feature of the Judeo-Christian God is that God is revealed as powerless or, to say it better, as a God who opts to be powerless because powerlessness is the only way to guarantee human freedom. Thus the vulnerable Pauline communities, bearers of the message of a vulnerable Christ, the crucified, will be the ones who announce the triumph of love before the "invulnerable" Roman Empire, the crucifier.

"The perverse core" of Christianity will be precisely the game in which the powerful becomes weak and the weak show their strength. The nothingness that represents wholeness is the key to this reversal. Žižek relies here on J. Rancière, who affirms that "there is politics when there is a part that has no part."³⁰ Here Žižek will also take advantage of the concept, central to the analysis of Giorgio Agamben, of a "Remainder," which always gives meaning to any construction of the whole: "the point is, rather, that *the singular agent of radical universality is the Remainder itself*, that which has no proper place in the 'official' universality grounded in exception."³¹ In formulating the idea of a "Remainder" that constitutes the whole, the Pauline construction somehow gives room to that which has no room or, even better, quoting 1 Cor. 1:28, "the things that are not, so that he [God] might nullify the things that are." That excess itself will later allow love to differentiate itself from the law as its excess. Love is the law that goes beyond the law. Love, to manifest itself, needs the law to fulfill its excess. That relationship, in turn, allows the law as an occasion for sin and, at the same time, as an occasion to declare the law as just, good, and holy. This excess that love gives (Žižek quotes 1 Corinthians 13), which is excess of knowledge, heroism, prophecy, and even faith (if I have all that but have no love, I am nothing), is precisely what makes us vulnerable.

The lover knows that he needs the loved one, knows that he is in the beloved's hands; and, at the same time, in order for that person to be loved, he or she needs to be shown in their integrity. This ambiguity resides in the very heart of Paul's dialectics of strength and weakness. In Žižek's words: "Perhaps the true achievement of Christianity is to elevate a loving (imperfect) Being to the place of God, that is, of ultimate perfection. That is the kernel of the Christian experience."³² What remains to be developed is how this is done in a concrete politics!

Žižek certainly indicates how he understands some points of this Pauline development. Thus he again values the idea of universality as an achievement with clear political implications: The "Part" (which one has to differentiate from "the Remainder"—from those who have no part—who represent what is universal, that Part as "particularity") is, then, "the 'sinful' unredeemed and unredeemable aspect of the Universal—to put it in actual political terms, every politics which grounds itself in the reference to some substantial (ethnic, religious, sexual, lifestyle . . .) particularity is by definition reactionary."³³

Another theme that Žižek has developed is the activity that results not from waiting for the Messiah but from perceiving him as already present. While a "coming" messianism, like the suspension of the revolution until the right time, involves the expectation of the future moment at which the conditions will be right, that Remainder, which is the hidden universal, not only waits for something to happen somehow but also lives out of having perceived that the event (Jesus, his crucifixion and resurrection) has *already* occurred, that the moment is now, an eternal now. Therefore, the conviction and the commitment to live the truth of the event is the condition that makes the event possible. In theology we call this "eschatological anticipation," which is also lived out not only at the subjective level but also in political action.

As we see, although the paths of their arguments do not coincide and both Badiou and Žižek venture into intricate paths of abstraction, when it comes to the practical and political dimensions of the Pauline message, these authors find themselves very close to each other.

Giorgio Agamben: Paul and Messianism

Giorgio Agamben, for his part, seeks to recover, from another point of view, the concept of "messianic" in the West. His work *Il tempo che resta* (ET *The Time That Remains*) points out precisely the messianic-apocalyptic character of Pauline faith and, along these lines, affirms some of the ideas expressed here. Agamben extends his interest to the philosophical and cultural dimensions of what "the messianic times" mean. If Badiou and Žižek make Jacques Lacan and his theories the hermeneutical key to the relevance of Paul, Agamben will take as his tools the postulates of Walter Benjamin. Both authors cited above fundamentally debate the constitution of the subject and, therefore, the meaning of universalism as a way of overcoming the fragmentation of particularisms, which in the ultimate analysis is about the possibility of history. Benjamin's postulates, however, take Agamben down other paths.

Indeed, Agamben sees history and its universality from an entirely different perspective. The *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, one of the final legacies of Benjamin's random trajectory, would feed the thought of Agamben,³⁴ following, in this respect,

the path opened by Jacob Taubes and his posthumous *Political Theology of Paul*. History, in this case, is not simply constructed from the subjects but from a particular form of approaching such subjectivity, that is, from that of the victims, who are in turn the bearers of hope. "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the rule is 'the state of exception' in which we live."³⁵ But Benjamin posits a possible exception in regard to that state of exception, which is what will nourish hope. That "exception to the exception" (which is part of the discussion with Carl Schmitt) is, in Benjamin's view, the messianic possibility. At the end of his thesis, Benjamin reaffirms that he is an heir of the messianic tradition of Judaism: "Since every second was for it [Judaism] the small door through which the messiah could enter."³⁶

Agamben's reading presents to us a Paul whose theology we may reread in this century, thanks to the postulates of a German-Jewish author victimized by Nazism. According to Agamben, the "messianic Marxism" of Benjamin, linked to the utopian Marxism of Ernst Bloch,³⁷ permits a reading of Paul in the present again. It is certainly a hermeneutical key that, in my opinion, unlocks Pauline eschatology—which remains overshadowed in other authors—and allows it to be given its full dimension. How do the different temporalities that live together and break through human history interplay—temporalities that construct and create tensions as a history of injustices and violence but also as a history of redemption? The kingdom, for Benjamin, is not "the goal of history," but its end. "That is why the order of the profane should not be built upon the idea of the divine Kingdom," he affirms in his "Theological-Political Fragment," a postscript to his *Theses*. If Paul had been able to avail himself of this vocabulary, I believe, he would have said exactly the same thing. This idea is critical, I have to admit, to one important line of thought of the "theologies of liberation," which with little subtlety identified class struggle (or struggles for racial, ethnic, or gender equality, and so on) with "the construction of the kingdom."

Returning to Agamben: the idea of messianic time that cuts and runs through historical time compels him to see Pauline universalism under another light than Žižek and Badiou. It is not simply the overcoming of particularisms but the internal division that causes, inside of the particularisms and the passing of time and its super-positions, the presence of the Messiah. As we read on the (anonymous) back cover copy of the Italian original, for Paul the presence of the Messiah, far from fusing the identities in the universal idea of one religion for all, "revokes all identity and all vocation." Agamben, then, proposes that, when talking about people, there is a division—indeed, a structure—that takes the Mosaic law as its nest, that parts humanity into Israelites ("the people," *am*) and "the nations" (*goyim*).³⁸ Another form of division would break through these identifying particularities: life in the flesh or life in Spirit—a clear division that dominates Paul's thinking in Romans 8. This division will be extended to the very same conformation of persons as well (cf. Romans 7).

This break within the establishments that create the history of particularities causes (invites, calls) the existence of a "rest," a break within a break, which is the eschatological presence of the Messiah. (Agamben insists that for Paul, *Christos* must always be understood as a recognition of the messianic function of Jesus according to Jewish tradition—or at least to some of these traditions—and not as if it were merely a proper name.³⁹) This vision of the messianic "rest" becomes a differentiating key of

universalism. In my original thesis, although with a different focus, I called this an “inclusive exclusivism” of Paul’s proposal, which confronts the exclusive inclusivism of Roman imperial politics and even of today’s globalization.

Agamben uses this approach when, in his article “¿Que es un pueblo?”⁴⁰ he points out, following Rancière, that the concept of people unfolds in both an idea of people-as-totality and people-as-excluded, that which has no part. And it is precisely this last concept that gives meaning to the whole. The rest, which in reality is that which is excluded yet is claimed to be the whole, is what enables us to understand history, as enlightened by the reality inaugurated by Jesus, the Messiah.⁴¹ The rest, the excluded, is the expression of what is universal. If I may say this, moving away from Agamben’s words, the excluded is in reality the transcendent that manifests itself in history; it transcends history precisely because of its exclusion. This is the paradigm of the crucified Messiah.⁴² This reversal is the key for understanding the other Pauline paradoxes: weakness is strength; what is not undoes what is; the cross is the glory that also reverses the meaning of the relationship between the future and memory. There is, thus, a distinction between *chronos* and *kairos*, the very heart of Pauline apocalypticism: the dimension of faith that subsumes every discourse.

Relevance of the Approaches of Philosophical Politics

The social location of an author, the place from which the author reads, is a decisive factor in determining the interpretations of a text. Badiou, Žižek, and Agamben make significant contributions to the interpretation of Paul, even more so than some of the classical, theological interpreters, who repeat themselves and tangle themselves up in trying to turn Paul into a transmitter of dogmas or a dispenser of orthodox ethics. From Marx to Nietzsche, from Freud to Lacan, from Benjamin to Derrida, the parameters of their reading allow them to explore and re-create a Paul for today, a Paul who still contributes to untangling some of the Gordian knots of Western culture by moving beyond religious readings.

However, the place from which I read is different. I am a theologian who specializes in the Bible, an exegete by profession, and a political activist who has personally suffered, along with close friends in the communities where I have served as a pastor, the taunts and threats of military dictatorships and their states of emergency, their prisons and camps. I have been part of a people, a nation of peoples, who today still live under constraints and oppressions, exclusions and pain, imposed by the globalized empire. This is a people that combines weaknesses and struggles, conflicts and quests, and heroic deeds and explainable ambiguities, and who at the same time suffers, accepts, and resists the hegemonies that impoverish them. The sense of immediacy, the urgency of daily living with situations of hunger, alienation, and death, put before me another agenda, a less sophisticated one, if you will. While the intricate, twisting elaborations of sophisticated abstractions are valuable and productive, I find it easier to identify myself with the victims of persecution and oppression. It is not that we do not learn from them. But in the places of our life, we look for a chance to read Paul as a tool in the construction of an alternative, in anticipation of a time of emancipation, in the urgency of a political struggle. We seek a reading anchored in the everyday, not from a superficial pragmatism or because of an uncritical eclecticism, but from a need to

operate, to demonstrate the relevance of this message in the conflict of discourses that arises in the struggle for hegemony. Therefore another philosophy weighs more heavily in the construction of my argument: a philosophy of praxis from the work of Antonio Gramsci, another victim of Fascism.

This abstracting can also be seen in the area of methodology. Badiou, Žižek, and even Agamben hold back from interpreting Paul in his social location; they produce a Pauline discourse relatively free of time and place, a Paul who writes to *them* but not so much to the communities that identified with internal issues of his social position. To me, from both my theoretical position as a biblical interpreter and my reading of the historical locations, it is indispensable to take into account both the social location from which Paul wrote and the social location of the receiving communities that read him. The vision and experience of the world of a traveling artisan were not the same as the vision and experience of a philosopher in the first century or those of a university academician today. It is not the same to write to the ruling class of the empire as it is to write to others within university circles, or, for that matter, to communities that subsist at the margins of society. These differences influence both the way in which Paul was read in his time and how we must read him today.

We also have to differentiate ourselves from the aforementioned authors in that we do not take Pauline literature, not even the letters considered authentic, as an indivisible whole. Our exegetical discipline leads us to take every text in its unity and relative autonomy. The “universal” Paul writes to each community located in time, in history, in the evolution of his own missionary experience. In this we also stick more to Pauline contextuality than to philosophical abstraction, although we will not refuse the theoretical tools that can enrich this stance. In this effort we look for the relevance and meaning of Paul’s writings.