

# The Songs and the Cries of Believers:

## *Justification in Paul*

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**This article brings together the perspectives of liberation theologies, feminist theologies, and the Jewish-Christian dialogue on Paul's theology. Paul is speaking about sin in the context of Jewish experiences in the Roman Empire. Paul's texts should not be read as doctrinal language. His theology is rooted in the prayer and worship of the communities of earliest Christianity. The laments that we read in Paul's letters express the life destroying power of sin and simultaneously the praise of God by those who have experienced liberation through Christ. This liberation includes being faithful to the Torah even for people who come into Christian communities from a non-Jewish religious background.**

### **I. Hermeneutical Fundamentals**

In contrast to the long tradition of Pauline reception, which has read the Letter to the Romans and what it says about "justification" as a document of a timeless anthropology ("of human beings" before God) and christology, in the last thirty years there has arisen a completely new initiative in Pauline reception, and in fact in Christian theology. It arises above all from three sources: liberation theologies in the ecumenical church community throughout the world, Christian-Jewish dialogue, and the women's movement and feminist theologies. These discourses have often taken place separately from one another,<sup>1</sup> but their wealth should be gathered into one.

Through the work of liberation theologies it has become unmistakably clear that in the future theologies must be contextualized. For the interpretation of Paul that means paying attention to **two social contexts**, the historical context of Paul's own time (see Section IV below) and that of Pauline interpretation at the present time. I read Paul and his statements about justification of sinners as a woman in a society that, while maintaining its own wealth, is the cause of increasing unemployment and impoverishment, in my own country and throughout the world. Liberation theologies teach us to recognize the injustice of doing theology in a timeless vacuum: "It is not that the poor do not feel that they are sinners. On the contrary . . . . But in Latin America the sinners that kill are very tangible."<sup>2</sup> A noncontextual doctrine of justification has brought individual pardon to the perpetrators, often without showing them that they must repent. Liberation theology thus teaches us to inquire about **victims and perpetrators**, about complicity and the exploitation of some human beings by others. Attention to the differences

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<sup>1</sup> One example of the fragmentation of this discourse is the first 1996 number of the periodical *Kirche und Israel*, which is devoted to a new paradigm of Pauline interpretation. This new paradigm, however, is related solely to Jewish-Christian dialogue; as is the case in most instances of German academic theology, no notice is taken of liberation and feminist theologies.

<sup>2</sup> Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective*. Translated by Sharon H. Ringe (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 20–21.

between people in this sense and the **perspectives** of interpretation must strike root in Christian theologies. Liberation theology has taught us to recognize the perspective that designates “others” as a form of domination, and to see timeless theology as a veiled deification of the wealthy white man, who has fashioned for himself a monument called “the human being” [or, often enough, “man”]. Liberation theology’s concept of “**structural sin**” is also exceptionally fruitful for Pauline interpretation, because it helps us to understand Paul’s idea of the universal power of sin. Through it we can perceive the connection between individual sin and social structures that impose sinfulness. The long Christian tradition of individualizing Paul’s message of justification so that it becomes the forgiveness of personal sins truncates Paul’s thought and can readily be misused as an instrument for justifying the perpetrators. The objection so often heard against liberation theologies, that they neglect the individual, is inappropriate.

Christian-Jewish dialogue has given a voice that cannot be ignored to the deep-seated anti-Judaism in Christian theology. This anti-Judaism is evident today, and it has also become clear that interpretation of the Letter to the Romans and its “doctrine” of justification and christology is the most stubborn bastion of Christian anti-Judaism. Anti-Jewish interpretation of Paul rests on a variety of fundamental assumptions: that Judaism is a **religion of deeds**: a pious Jew desires to achieve her or his own salvation through obedience to the Torah. Sin, according to Paul, is according to this view precisely that: regarding the Torah as the way to salvation and desiring to fulfill it. **Sin is thus self-confidence, hybris before God**, and the pious Jew is the exemplary sinner. Christian-Jewish dialogue has also made it clear that christology is an ideology of domination as long as it constitutes a denial that other religions are ways to salvation before God. **Claims to Christ’s uniqueness**—taken out of context—are thus expressions of the superiority of the Christian religion, and discriminate against other religions, with “Judaism” always the first to be pointed out as of lesser value. The perception of Judaism as a **religion of law** is associated with the Christian concept of a “law-free” Gentile Christianity (on this, see Section II below). This **law-free Gentile Christianity** thus appears as something established by Paul and as the mother of later Christianity. A critique of Christian anti-Judaism cannot accomplish its task instantaneously, or in a short space of time: the simplistic interpretive categories of a Christian God of love and a Jewish God of vengeance, of hypocritical Pharisees and “the” zealous, legalistic Jew are too deep-seated. This anti-Judaism must be exposed in the future, in what will probably prove to be a long process.<sup>3</sup> It is one of the origins of German Antisemitism, which led to the *Shoah*. And it is still the subtext of Western Christian exegesis, in Germany as well as in the US.

The women’s movement, and the feminist theologies growing out of it, has made it unmistakably clear that there exists a **gender hierarchy** according to which women are “different” from men, less important and describable in clichés (emotional in contrast to male rationality, etc.). Feminist theologies have subjected Paul (in the version propounded by the dominant interpretation of him) to a fundamental critique.<sup>4</sup> That 1 Cor 14:33b-36 may not have been written by Paul cannot erase the effects of the silencing of women throughout history even to today. The historical Paul offered sufficient occasion for this **ideology of the hatred and**

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<sup>3</sup> In the volume cited in n. 1 there is a good overview of the exegetical work of the last twenty-five years that uncovers anti-Judaism in Pauline interpretation (fundamental is E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977]) and develops alternatives (for which the standard is still Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976]).

<sup>4</sup> From among the wealth of relevant works I want to mention especially that of Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets. A Reconstruction through Paul’s Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), because she summarizes a generation’s critique of Paul.

**subjection of women.** He says that the man is the image of God and woman the image of the man (1 Cor 11:7). Beyond the “topic of women,” feminist theologies have examined the authoritarian structure of the idea of the apostle in relationship to “his” communities. This critique has necessitated hermeneutical reflection on and exposition of my own idea of **the relationship between the apostle and the community**, since Paul has traditionally served as a projection screen for Christian images of officeholders and their claims to authority. But above all, the profound feminist discussion of **sin and guilt**<sup>5</sup> has yielded results that will change theology as a whole. In this discussion it has become clear that the idea of sin as rebellion against God, as the will to achieve for oneself, as assertion of independence and self-reliance encourages women to subordinate themselves and to surrender responsibility for themselves to others. That is, Christian theology of sin has cemented the social injustice of gender hierarchy and bestowed on it a theological blessing. In addition, through the assertion that we are all sinners it has lent support to the perpetrators of injustice, who cannot do otherwise than to pursue profit and success at the expense of others. Feminist theology has set itself vehemently against all manner of glorification of passive **sacrificial** attitudes, whether in christology or in lyric celebrations of love. Most feminist theologians, like the theologians of liberation, advocate contextualization, and thereby the differentiation of the subjects of faith as people who have gender, color—who, in short, have faces.

In feminist discussion the liberation-theological concept of structural sin has been further developed, and gender hierarchy, with its oppression of women (**the structural sin of patriarchy**) has been recognized as a building block in the unified structure of social oppression. The concept of women’s sin as **complicity** has led to an in-depth analysis of the involvement of women in social injustice through their gender roles.

At the present time there is still too great a degree of parallel coexistence among these three discourses that Christian theologians are developing from the ground up. In this essay I will attempt to make a fruitful application of the hermeneutical bases of all three discourses to the reading of Paul.

## II. A Church of the Gentiles, Faithful to the Law

The doctrine of justification as we find it in the history of Christian interpretation of Paul, apart from some new initiatives growing out of the context of Jewish-Christian dialogue, presupposes a separation of Paul from Judaism.

Since Justin and Marcion the majority of Christians among the Gentiles has interpreted itself as free from the Law. This means that Paul, as father of the Gentile mission, rejected the Law (*nomos* in Paul’s writing), the Torah of the Jewish people, as a way to salvation. This is mainline exegesis until the very day. The sharpest point of this “*abrogatio*” of the Law is seen to be the vehement rejection of circumcision for men not of Jewish descent who have come to believe in the God of Israel through Jesus Messiah (Letter to the Galatians). A whole congeries of anti-Jewish assertions about Jewish and Christian relationship to the Torah is bound up with this freedom of “Gentile Christianity” from the Law. It is said that Judaism is “legalistic” and wants to achieve salvation for itself through fulfillment of the Torah (see Section I above). Not only Paul, but Jesus before him is said to have criticized Judaism as legalistic. His struggle with

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<sup>5</sup> On this see: “Sünde/Schuld,” in Elisabeth Gössmann, et al., *Wörterbuch der Feministischen Theologie* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1991) 381–90; Luise Schottroff, “Die befreite Eva,” in Luise Schottroff and Christine Schaumberger, *Schuld und Macht* (München: Kaiser, 1988); Lucia Scherzberg, *Sünde und Gnade in der feministischen Theologie* (2nd ed. Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1992).

the Pharisees is supposed to have contained, in essence, the fundamental decision against the Law as a way of salvation. This concept of a “law-free” Gentile Christianity is anti-Jewish at its roots. This is not disputed by those who would like to maintain it even today; instead, they regard anti-Judaism as essential to Christianity. In particular, a christocentric concept of Christian identity and Christian confession is upheld as indispensable. This christocentrism regards all other religions as second-rate, and Judaism is always the most important religion over against which Christianity must be distinguished. This concept of law-free Gentile Christianity as the historical and theological basis of the Church throughout the centuries and even today is so deeply rooted in Christian thinking that a long process of reshaping of Christian life and theology will be required to overcome it. This model of interpretation is especially deep-seated in the interpretation of Paul.

If we inquire about the history of women in this historical and theological construct, we discover the first gaps. What did it mean for a Gentile woman to become a follower of the Jewish messiah Jesus? Within the framework of this concept the answer can only be: She learned that she could get to God without the Law and that it was highly important that Gentile Christian men should not be circumcised. The non-circumcision of Gentile Christian men could (possibly) have been liberating for her, because she could become a full member of the people of God, like men, whereas Jewish proselyte women must have felt second-class—uncircumcised—in contrast to full (male) proselytes who could be circumcised. Or—this is the other possibility—she could, like a Jewish proselyte woman, feel herself to be a full member of the people of God, since a Jewish proselyte woman too, from the Jewish perspective, was regarded not as an uncircumcised person, but as a full member.<sup>6</sup> The weakness of all these considerations is that they define women’s becoming Christians in terms of the significance of male circumcision, making the rejection of circumcision the central proof of Christian identity in a law-free Gentile Christianity. Gentile Christian women would thus have had to understand **not** circumcising men and **not** following various other forms of Jewish religious life (food laws, purity laws) as the practice of their faith, which arose out of belief in the God of Israel, his unmerited grace, and his intervention on behalf of sinful humanity through the death and resurrection of Christ. The absurdity of the artificial construction of a “law-free” Gentile Christianity is clearly apparent when we think through the concept in terms of its consequences for Gentile Christian women.

This concept, I respond for both historical and theological reasons, was developed after the middle of the second century; it does not correspond to the letters of the historical Paul, who was a Jew faithful to the Torah until his death. That Paul worked for the development of a church among the nations that was **faithful** to the Torah is a truth I want to demonstrate through the exegesis of a text that is regarded as a clear presentation of a law-free Gentile Christianity, namely Gal 2:16:

. . . yet we know that no one is justified by the works of the law, but only through faith in Jesus the Messiah. And we too have come to trust in the Messiah Jesus, so that we might be justified by confidence in the Messiah Jesus, and not by doing the works of the law, because no human being will be justified by the works of the law. [Author’s translation]

Traditional reading: “The Jew” wants to achieve justification before God by means of works of the Law. Therefore the Law leads to sin, namely pious works intended to achieve

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<sup>6</sup> For feminist discussion of this question see Luise Schottroff, “‘Gesetzesfreies Heidenchristentum’ und die Frauen? Feministische Analysen und Alternativen,” in Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, eds., *Von der Wurzel getragen. Christlich-feministische Exegese in Auseinandersetzung mit Antijudaismus* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) 227–45, at 230–31.

salvation through one's own effort, thus setting God aside (or even rejecting him). Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God has intervened on behalf of the human being bound in this sin, and has justified the godless. The Law is now obsolete as a way of salvation. For Christian faith it is significant only as an ethical tradition. The ritual law, especially circumcision, is no longer valid for Christians. Circumcision of non-Jewish Christian men leads to subjection to the Law, and not to justification before God.

New reading: The key to a new reading of Paul's theology is his concept of sin. Paul never says that the human will to fulfill the Law is sin. He says that all people sin because all transgress the Law as a whole, that is, do not live according to the will of God (cf. only Rom 2:17-24; 3:9-20; 7:14-25). A false way of life destroys the life that God wills. This false way of life arises out of structural sin, whose power is omnipresent and makes people into murderers. The death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah signify God's intervention on behalf of humanity, which is estranged from life. Now we are free from the compulsive rule of false praxis. We can "walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4), that is, we can live according to Torah. Paul rigorously maintained that without faith in Christ a life according to the will of God, the Torah, is impossible. He mourned that most of the Jewish people of his time, if they knew about this position, did not accept it. But his assertion of it did not mean that he no longer regarded himself as a Jew.

Therefore developing a new reading of Paul means asking social-historical, practical questions about real life. How did people who followed the gospel shape their own lives, and how did those lives differ from the way they used to live? This way of thinking yields the historical picture of a church among the nations that is true to the Law, in solidarity with the Jewish people, including those Jews who did not accept the way of faith that God's action in Christ has opened. Arguments about what the will of God as it can be discerned in the Torah means today were a part of Jewish as well as Christian halakhic discourse (see Rom 12:2). Thus there could be arguments about the circumcision of Gentile Christian men or about food laws among Christians, and between Christians and Jews, on the basis of the Torah.<sup>7</sup> But such arguments were not decisive regarding one's adherence to an institution or an alternative way of salvation, Judaism or Christianity. Thus out of the new reading of Paul that I am attempting to sketch here arises an understanding of the meaning of the Torah for Paul that differs from what has been developed in traditional Pauline exegesis. This different understanding of Torah<sup>8</sup> has decisive consequences also for our interpretation of justification.

### III. The Songs and the Cry of Believers

"But now . . . the righteousness of God has been disclosed" (Rom 3:21). Now is the time to praise God and confess openly: "I am not ashamed of the gospel" (Rom 1:16). Both passages open with a tone of public confessional affirmation. Now God has given humanity a new beginning; God has revealed his righteousness, and his righteousness means salvation. But this public affirmation is also and simultaneously praise of God. We give praise to God because we have experienced salvation (Rom 5:2). Romans 5:1-5 is a text of worship, praising God because of the gift of justification. The "we" of the text is that of the congregation that praises God. The "I" of the confession in Rom 1:17 alternates with the "we" of the praise giving community, e.g.,

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<sup>7</sup> For an argument against the historical analyses that see circumcision of proselytes as indispensable even in Paul's time see Luise Schottroff, "Gesetzesfreies Heidenchristentum" (n. 6 above) 240.

<sup>8</sup> I consider particularly the works of Krister Stendahl (see n. 3 above) and of Peter von der Osten-Sacken, *Evangelium und Torah. Aufsätze zu Paulus* (Munich: Kaiser, 1987) and idem *Die Heiligkeit der Tora. Studien zum Gesetz bei Paulus* (Munich: Kaiser, 1989) to be milestones on the road to a no longer anti-Jewish understanding of the Torah in Paul's writing.

in Rom 8:38 (with 8:37, 39). Paul and the congregation speak to God, and their praise of God has public consequences; hence it is also a confession of faith.

Now is the moment of experiencing that the way of liberation (*apolytrōsis*, Rom 3:24) is opened to humanity, that their enslaved bodies are freed (Rom 8:23) as once Israel had been freed from Egyptian captivity (Exod 6:6; 15:13; Deut 7:8; 9:26, *lytrousthai*, cf. Luke 1:68). The “now” in Rom 3:21 is the “now” of the experience of resurrection. God’s future determines the present. And all this the God of Israel has brought about through the resurrection of the brother of believers: Christ is the “firstborn among a large family” (Rom 8:29). His martyr’s death has brought liberation and resurrection (Rom 3:25).

In giving this sketch of Pauline thought I am concerned to rediscover the language of faith as the community’s dialogue with God in Paul’s letters.<sup>9</sup> His texts are shaped by liturgical tradition, even when he heaps up nouns as he does in Rom 3:21-26. The **genre** of the text is praise of God. The “now” is the now of encounter with God and of the overturning of the world’s structures. The new creation is promised by God and can now be experienced in one’s own present. In thus sketching Paul’s thought I am also interested in Paul’s **eschatology** (which is not fundamentally different from that of Jesus): God will judge humanity on the day of judgment, which is also the day of liberation (Rom 13:12). We are already experiencing God’s positive verdict. It will be “a gift” (Rom 3:24); it is already freeing us to new life. The future resurrection of the righteous is already transforming people into risen beings. The Spirit of God is endowing them with power.<sup>10</sup>

An examination of the genre of the text calls into question the traditional categorization of the statements of the Letter to the Romans within a trans-historical anthropology. In the texts referred to and in many others Paul adopts and formulates language of worship. But even when Paul speaks of Adam and humanity (as, for example, in Rom 5:12-21), the text falls within the Jewish history of interpretation of Genesis 2 and 3, and therefore in the history of *halakhah* or midrash, which is certainly not interested in atemporal anthropological statements. These texts deliberately speak to their concrete historical context. They have no other purpose than to interpret Scripture for the present community.

I would like further to demonstrate the rootedness of the Pauline message of justification in worship on the basis of two verbs in Romans 8. “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery . . . but you have received a spirit of adoption [‘being a child of’],” of belonging to God, “[through whom] we cry ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom 8:15). The Spirit of God makes possible audible public prayer, the **prophetic cry** (an apt paraphrase of the connotations of *krazein*).<sup>11</sup> It is the shout of gratitude and praise of God because we—believers—are healed from the unrighteousness we do. Romans 7:25, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”<sup>12</sup> is such a cry of thanksgiving,

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<sup>9</sup> In the case of Rom 3:21-26 there is discussion about whether Paul has made use of a piece of pre-Pauline tradition at this point. Only rarely is there reflection on the genre of the text and its liturgical character, even though such considerations would also explain the deviations from Paul’s ordinary usage. Otto Michel has observed the presence of liturgical language here and in other passages of Romans (*Der Brief an die Römer* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963]).

<sup>10</sup> For this interpretation of Paul’s eschatology cf. the description of the eschatology of the Jesus tradition in Luise Schottroff, *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 152–73.

<sup>11</sup> Ernst Käsemann, “Der gottesdienstliche Schrei nach der Freiheit,” in idem, *Paulinische Perspektiven* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1969) 211–36, thinks of “ecstatic expressions” in prayer effected by the divine Spirit in Rom 8:15 and 8:26 (at p. 224). I would like to vary this interpretation to the extent that this prayer takes place publicly, out loud, in common, and with a content that can be understood. At another point (see n. 17 below) Käsemann is clear about the public nature of the prayer.

<sup>12</sup> The appellation of Christ as *kyrios* is inadequately reproduced in English by the usual translation, “Lord.” In early Christian prayer language the word embraced a fuller meaning: “Christ is close to God; we are made free.” The word thus contains feelings of reverence and enthusiasm over the change wrought in one’s own life. Beyond that it also has the political and social meaning: “We bow down to no earthly rule.”

alongside the despairing sigh of Rom 7:24: “Wretched one that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”—that is, the ongoing deadly actions that are lamented from Rom 7:14 onward. This “crying out” is to be set alongside the “**mutual groaning**” in Rom 8:22. The creation and the believers together are in birthpangs. The birth toward which they are travailing is that of the new creation. Now is the time for birthpangs, and for crying out in travail. When words for this liberating cry of hope fail us, the “Spirit helps us in our weakness . . . with loud groans too deep for words” (Rom 8:26).<sup>13</sup> The mutual groaning in v. 22, superficially considered, may reflect the groaning of creation to which is added the Spirit-effected groaning of the children of God. But Paul is interested in the **community** of those who cry out in hope. He begins v. 23 “and not only it” (that is, the creation) but we with it. The entire creation takes part in the waiting (*apokaradokia*), impatient and full of hope, that in Lutheran tradition is unfortunately given a negative nuance (“the eager longing of the creature,” cf. Rom 8:19).<sup>14</sup> The community of creation and believers who are travailing for that birth is a part of their work of hope. The word *systemazein*, rare in Greek, should be set alongside the many verb forms with *syn* that were so commonly used in early Christianity for the expression of community action. Most of them are neologisms created out of the experience of the communities.<sup>15</sup> The “now” of faith is the time just before the birth, the “pushing” contractions and the loud cries of the woman in travail. The hope for new life is experienced in the work done for the sake of the future. Thus the whole of this groaning is made concrete in the experience of women in childbirth.<sup>16</sup>

Ernst Käsemann has given precise definition to his conviction that this worship with its cries to God does not belong only in specially defined worship services; he calls it “worship in the world’s daily life.”<sup>17</sup>

Paul does not develop an anthropological doctrine or transhistorical dogmatics. He is the mouthpiece of the community; he writes down what it prays, adding his words to its prayers, so that he is appropriately understood as a “collective author,” as Elsa Tamez writes.<sup>18</sup>

#### IV. The Lament of the Liberated

Romans 1:16-18 sets the revelation of God’s righteousness side by side with the revelation of God’s wrath. Afterward Paul speaks at length about universal sin and the transgression of the Torah by Jews and Gentiles. The section culminates in a moving lament (3:[9], 10-18). This psalm of lament consists of quotations, most of them only slightly altered,

<sup>13</sup> Ernst Käsemann proposes for *αλαλζτος* in 8:26 words that are unutterable because of their holiness (ibid. 224) and translates the beginning of 8:26 as “we do not know what is appropriate for prayer.” But the “intercession of the Spirit” should not be restricted to an intimate event, even though that event is communal; instead, the Spirit-empowered ability to speak publicly (and here, too, it is a question of speech) must be included: see also Mark 13:11; John 14:26.

<sup>14</sup> On this see Luise Schottroff, “Die befreite Eva” (n. 5 above) 113.

<sup>15</sup> On this see Luise Schottroff, *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters* (n. 10 above) 212.

<sup>16</sup> On this see Luise Schottroff, “Die befreite Eva” (n. 5 above) 110–20, and Luzia Sutter-Rehmann, “Geh’, frage die Gebälerin . . .” *Feministisch-befreiungstheologische Untersuchungen zum Gebärmotiv in der Apokalypik* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1995). It is grotesque that in the Lutheran tradition of Pauline interpretation women’s childbearing is interpreted only negatively, as “an exaggerated . . . experience of nothingness and mortality” (Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer*. EKK [Zürich: Benziger; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1980] 2:155). The devaluation of women, sexuality, and the body has left deep traces in theology.

<sup>17</sup> See Ernst Käsemann, *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964) 2:198–204.

However, Käsemann’s formulation is unfortunately loaded with a theology of orders: Christians remain in their condition; even the hierarchy of the sexes must be retained. This concept of a theology of orders is based on Käsemann’s fundamental assumption that Paul had to battle against “enthusiasts.”

<sup>18</sup> Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace* (n. 2 above) 48: “. . . in Paul we have to do with someone who came from a situation of privilege, who wrote well . . . and who was able to perceive coherently the underlying structures of the reality in which he lived. Paul, as such a ‘transindividual individual,’ was a collective author with a collective consciousness.”

from the Septuagint: Eccl 7:20; Pss 13:1-3; 5:10; 139:4b; 9:28; Isa 59:7, 8; Ps 35:2. Although many have seen that the arc of tension stretches from 1:18 to this psalm, the text has received relatively little theological attention (occasionally, for example, in its relationship to 3:19-20). There has been repeated discussion of the possibility that this could be a pre-Pauline florilegium, and that the text has a character of worship. I regard it as pre-Pauline to the extent that, like the Pauline texts already discussed, it has its *Sitz im Leben* in the early Christian community. I place it within the **genre** of (community) lament. It is important for the interpretation of this section to see it as liturgical language of those who have been liberated by Christ. Their lament over the contamination of humanity and of the body is full of horror and excludes no one. This universality is bewailed seven times in vv. 10-12: all people without exception are subjected to sin.

The whole body of humanity and the whole body of each individual is destroyed: throat, tongue, lips, mouth, feet, and eyes are mentioned (vv. 13-18) as a shorthand description of the entire body.

This is the body of sin and death (Rom 6:6; 7:24) that God, through divine righteousness, liberated when Christ arose (Rom 8:23). The body of death is bewailed by the liberated; its murderous deeds sound threateningly close. I want to clarify, in socio-historical terms, how the relationship between sin and liberation is depicted here (see below).

But first I want to consider the lament more closely in terms of its **perspectives**. Verses 10-12, in the new form given them by Paul (in part utterly different from their form in the original context of the quotations)<sup>19</sup> speak from God's perspective on humanity as a whole. It is God's voice, God's despair that is adopted by those who pray. They speak God's judgment on themselves as doers of the deed: "There is no one who is righteous." In vv. 13-18 also the text speaks of the deeds of unrighteousness, but the perspective is that of the victims: they know which words are really snakes' venom (v. 13), and they recognize the violence in words that are as vicious as the severity of a slaveholder (bitterness/*pikria*, v. 14). They see whose feet run swiftly to shed blood. Here the perspective of victims of multiple forms of violence is adopted. Mistreatment and the miseries of the poor are named, and are judged as unrighteousness (*syntrimma*/ruin; *talaipōria*/the misery of the poor, v. 16). The experience of violence is not that of a majority suffering from the effects of war, but stems from poverty, slavery, and the words of people who have the power to oppress and kill other people with their commands and decisions. The deeds of unrighteousness represent concrete experiences. They are not parts of an unspecific lamentation over the evils of humanity. In part they overlap in content with deeds that are listed in Rom 1:29-31. The underlying thought is of violations of the Torah, as elsewhere in Romans 1-3 where the text speaks of sin. Universal sin takes concrete form in violations of the Torah. No one is excepted from it. The simultaneity of different perspectives in this psalm is impressive: God judges all humanity; the victims call their experiences of violence by name. In their prayer

<sup>19</sup> James D. G. Dunn (*Romans 1-8*. WBC 38 [Dallas: Word Books, 1988] ad loc) has given particular attention to the perspective of this lament. According to him the quoted portions of the Psalms all presuppose the contrast between the righteous and the unrighteous, that is, Israel's self-awareness as the people who, through the Torah, have been chosen and set apart from other nations. By his use of these quotations Paul criticizes Israel's self-awareness and frees the Torah from a narrow, ethnic-exclusive interpretation. Christian faith leads to the divinely willed fulfillment of the Torah. It is true that in this interpretation a Law-obedient church of the nations is seen as a Pauline accomplishment, and to that extent traditional anti-Judaism is overcome, but this Law-obedient church of the nations puts an end to a false Jewish understanding of the Torah. Dunn's sociological construction continues the anti-Jewish Christian idea of a narrow, particularistic Israel versus a universal gospel. Certainly there were in Judaism at that time arguments about whether there should be a mission to the Gentiles, but I would doubt that the exclusive position articulated a self-awareness that celebrated Jewish righteousness. I do not see a Pauline front against an ethnic-exclusive understanding of the Torah (see Section II above), and I interpret the psalm of lament in Rom 3:10-18 out of the thought context that emerges from the quotations chosen by Paul.

those liberated by Christ make God's perspective their own, but also that of the doers of misdeeds; here the complicity Paul explicitly considered in 1:32 must be implicitly taken into account. The liberated people, by making God's perspective their own, accept responsibility for their own deeds and complicities. The lament of the victims of violence is not relativized thereby. The members of the early Christian communities may well have been acquainted with these experiences of victimization through poverty, slavery, and oppression, but they do not relinquish their roles as perpetrators and accomplices. Thus language of worship gives a precise analysis without any cheap self-excuses. This brings about the "silencing of the mouths" spoken of in v. 19. The "we" in v. 19 is the "we" of the praying community that has experienced liberation and, with renewed eyes and mouths, calls by name the catastrophe of the deadly structures of its own time. The language of Scripture thus serves as a medium of social analysis.

## V. *Simul justus et peccator*—read socio-historically

The point here is not to discuss the Lutheran formula in dogmatic terms within the framework of Catholic and Lutheran interpretations, although I would tend to regard the Pauline texts more in terms of Catholic emphasis on the practice of faith than in my own Lutheran tradition ("our own strength availeth nothing"). I consider the Lutheran formula entirely appropriate as a description of the existence of believers as it is illuminated by the Pauline letters. In Rom 3:10-18 Paul has written down the lament of the liberated, their analysis of the social structures of guilt in which they themselves are complicit. These texts should not be read in atemporal terms, as a doctrine about "humanity," as anthropology. "Human beings have a face, a social location, color, and sex. . . . Therefore, to speak of justification as the affirmation of life implies that life as it now exists is touched and transformed on the concrete plane of experience and praxis."<sup>20</sup> Thus I value the Lutheran formula *simul justus et peccator* not because of its androcentrism or its timelessness and lack of social differentiation, but because it expresses the tension of the life within which liberation through Christ is accomplished.

The social location of the theology of sin in the Letter to the Romans can be described socio-historically with the help of several sources of information. There is adequate data about the socio-historical location of the early Christian and Jewish communities in Rome. Paul's letters themselves are valuable socio-historical sources. The metaphorical content of those letters offers keys to social experiences when they are read in light of a parable theory that does not treat the "images" used as incidental, but recognizes them as a particular interpretation of social experiences. In Jewish apocalyptic literature from the first century C.E. there is abundant material parallel to Paul's theology of sin that also permits conclusions to be drawn about socio-historical contexts. We may mention, for example, 1QH 9:14; CD 5:13-17; 4 Ezra 7:22-24 as parallels to the idea of universal sin or, more precisely, as statements of the truth that there is no place of total innocence. I would like to sketch here my socio-historical location of Paul's idea of sin in relation to these fields of research.<sup>21</sup> Two texts will be chosen as examples: Rom 7:14-25 and 4 Ezra 9:26-10:27.

Romans 7:14-25 laments an alienation of the "self," the "I." Actions are alienated from the "self" as the law of action is determined by *hamartia*, which dwells like a demon within the

<sup>20</sup> Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace* (n. 2 above) 42.

<sup>21</sup> I will mention here only a few works on these fields of socio-historical research: Peter Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten* (2nd ed. Tübingen: Mohr, 1989); S. Safrai and M. Stern, *The Jewish People in the First Century*, Vol. 1 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974); Luise Schottroff, "Die Schreckensherrschaft der Sünde und die Befreiung durch Christus nach dem Römerbrief des Paulus," in eadem, *Befreiungserfahrungen. Studien zur Sozialgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Munich: Kaiser, 1990) 57-72.

“self” (7:17, 20). The “I” is captive to sin (7:23). I read this section of the text as a lament at the alienation of action. The “I” lives in an intimate union with and affection toward the Torah (7:16, 22), loves good deeds done according to Torah (implicit in 7:15), and desires to live according to Torah. But sin destroys one’s actual deeds. It is death-dealing action for oneself and others. I understand the “I” here not as a pre-Christian (or non-Christian, or Jewish) way of being, but as the believer’s self, liberated by the gospel and with its view of things sharpened by the gospel. Because they stand on their own feet on liberated ground, because their eyes have been renewed by the fear of God, they recognize the destruction in which they are taking part. This work of destruction is described in the Letter to the Romans in imagery drawn from the experiences of slaves (Rom 6:6; 7:14; all the statements about the *sōma* ruled by sin and death, and more besides) and from the experience of political oppression (Rom 6:12; 5:21; 6:14; 7:23, and frequently elsewhere).<sup>22</sup> Torah is the way to salvation, the way to life, but violent subjection to sin destroys action according to Torah. Not all Jewish people have experienced this alienation of those faithful to the Torah from God and themselves so deeply, not even Paul before he was called by the Risen One (Phil 3:6-7). By his acceptance of the conferral of righteousness by God outside the Torah, and despite his unrighteous deeds, his eyes have been opened to the extent of the destruction wrought upon and by his actions. Thus the gospel liberates, through the liberating act of God, to the possibility of acting according to Torah, despite alienation. Sin and gospel are not two epochs or periods of time in believers’ lives. Sin and the death-dealing structures of the world shaped by sin are the place in which people live, and in which they live according to Torah as persons rendered righteous by God. Often in the Lutheran tradition the “I” of Rom 7:7-25 has been described as the self that serves death because it **desires** to fulfill the Torah (e.g., Ernst Käsemann). But I regard this understanding of sin and Torah as an inadequate interpretation of Paul.

We cannot do justice to Paul in terms of a dualistic schema of before-and-after<sup>23</sup> or a succession of despair and redemption. He describes liberation and a clear vision of structural<sup>24</sup> and individual sin as a process of life that means resurrection.

The socio-historical concretion of all this can be discerned above all in Paul’s metaphors. The “I” in Rom 7:14-25 loves the Torah as God’s will and the way to life, is alienated from God by its own actions, and again and again receives the gift of being able to see and act anew. The alienation is described in images that express universal and total domination over bodies (*sōma*). Thus the experience of enslavement on the part of the nations subjected to Rome is brought to expression. For Jewish people, that enslavement has destroyed their living and acting according to Torah.

In 4 Ezra this social experience of **the destruction of Jewish identity through Roman rule** is expressed not in images, but in direct statements: The prophet laments, “For you see how our sanctuary has been laid waste . . . our temple destroyed . . . our harp has been laid low . . . our holy things have been polluted . . . our priests have been burned to death, our Levites have gone into exile, our virgins have been defiled, and our wives have been ravished; our righteous men have been carried off, our little ones have been cast out, our young men have been enslaved . . .(10:21-22, NRSV)”.

This lament, with its precise description of the destruction of the Jewish people by Rome’s war on them in 66–70 C.E. and its consequences, is spoken by the prophet as a reproach

<sup>22</sup> For more detail see Luise Schottroff, “Die Schreckensherrschaft der Sünde” (n. 21 above).

<sup>23</sup> Fundamental here is E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (n. 3 above).

<sup>24</sup> For this concept see Christine Schaumberger’s contribution in *Schuld und Macht* (n. 5 above) 251–62.

against a weeping old woman. She ought to weep for Zion's misery—not for her own little troubles. After long barrenness, she bore a son. God took pity on this lowly slave woman (4 Ezra 10:45; cf. Gen 30:23; 1 Sam 2:1; Luke 1:25, 48). She bore a son, and the whole city praised God. The son grew up, and she prepared for his wedding. On the threshold of the bridal chamber, he fell dead. Now all hope for the future is destroyed. The prophet sees clearly what is happening in the people of Israel's religious and political situation under Rome's conquering rule, but he is blind to the woman, and therefore to God. He laments without any perspective toward liberation: all are compelled to transgress the will of God. There is no way out, for God's justice is unremitting. "And now, O Lord, why have you . . . scattered your only one among the many?" (5:28).

The prophet sees clearly and at the same time is blind. He reproaches the weeping old woman with Zion's misfortune. He does not understand that her lament is already the birth cry of the new creation. He trusted God too little. He saw only the destruction and alienation from God and not God's love for Israel and for creation (5:33; 8:47). He has heard the promise of final liberation: "'The days are coming . . . when I require from the doers of iniquity the penalty of their iniquity, and when the humiliation of Zion is complete'" (6:18-19). But the prophet sees only the judgment and God's righteousness, and not that they are part of God's mercy. He sorrows for Israel and does not recognize the sign of hope: the weeping of the old woman, Zion. Thus God allows him, in the moment of his deepest blindness, to see God's grace. The old, weeping woman is transformed before his eyes. She "suddenly uttered a loud and fearful cry, so that the earth shook at the sound" (10:26). As in Romans 8, the cry of lament is at the same time the birth cry and the trembling of the earth in childbirth.<sup>25</sup> The prophet sees the new Jerusalem and the new creation. From this revelation he learns once again to trust the Torah as the way to life in the midst of the darkness of destruction (14:20, 34-35).

Like Paul, 4 Ezra speaks of sin not to discourage people and depress them about how guilty they are before God. The analysis of sin as a universal structure of death serves to shape a clearer vision of injustice and to strengthen people for life according to the Torah, a life of justice.

## VI. The Justification of the Godless and the Lifting Up of Those Brought Low

The theme of the sin of Jewish and non-Jewish people and God's righteousness dominates large portions of the Letter to the Romans (up to ch. 11), but in other Pauline texts it is only a marginal theme. In liberation theology's interpretation of Paul the justification of the godless reveals concrete consequences for the Christian life in the lifting up of the lowly: "The study of justification as the affirmation of life must have the particular face of the poor. That study must address not only their economic oppression, but also their dignity as human beings, which has been denied by insignificance, by the color of their skin, or by their sex."<sup>26</sup> "When one is . . . justified by God . . . one becomes a son or daughter of God and reigns in history."<sup>27</sup> In traditional interpretations of Paul being ungodly (Rom 4:5) or ruled by sin is dualistically separated from the reality of life. In this theology people's relationship to God and their conditions of life apparently have nothing to do with one another. In any case justification has effects on concrete life, but their significance is secondary. This separation of God from real life sets up a hermeneutical switch with fundamental consequences that, nevertheless, is not often

<sup>25</sup> For these ideas in 4 Ezra see Luzia Sutter-Rehmann, "Geh', frage die Gebälerin" (n. 16 above).

<sup>26</sup> Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace* (note 2 above) 43.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 127.

considered. Here I would like to show that it serves to cut off Paul's theology in Romans 1–11 from its Jewish root, and also from other Pauline letters such as 1 and 2 Corinthians.

That root is the relationship between God and the people Israel (and thus every individual within that nation): God comes aiding the people living in humiliation and poverty. In the Jesus tradition of the gospels the theme of God's lifting up of the lowly is central. Paul's first letter to Corinth also gives great weight to that theme. The godlessness of the ungodly (Rom 4:5) can be that of the perpetrators of evil (or those complicit in it), or that of the poor and lowly. The alienation of the poor from God, however, must be distinguished from that of those who have caused their humiliation. The message of the God who lifts up the lowly is directed to them, and only secondarily to the violent who will be ejected from their thrones (Luke 1:52; cf. 1 Cor 1:26-31). The Letter to the Romans, like the whole of the Pauline gospel, is primarily directed to the godless and the lowly, "first" to the Jews, but at the same time to all people (Rom 1:16). Paul presumes the experiences of social degradation as a matter of course. The people he is addressing, in the Letter to the Romans as well, are for the most part slaves, freed persons, and day laborers in the ports, in small industries, and in prostitution.

The blessing of the poor "in spirit" (*toῦ πνευματι*) in Matt 5:3 is helpful when we try to reconnect the justification of the godless and the raising up of the lowly. "Poor in spirit" is another name for the destruction wrought in people by experiences of oppression. The concept of "sinner" describes that destruction in relation to the Torah, that is, in terms of Jewish identity. The words "humiliation" or "degradation" set social marginalization in the foreground. And the concept of "poor in spirit" describes the all-encompassing, bodily and spiritual effects of poverty. All these concepts speak both of the relationship to God and the reality of life.

The poor in spirit among the nations are Paul's internal, principal dialogue partners in the Letter to the Romans. To them he proclaims the gospel of the poor among the nations, as Jesus proclaimed it to the people of Israel. Its basis is the idea of the God of Israel who is also a God of the nations (Rom 3:29). This God justifies the ungodly (4:5), lifts up the poor from the dust, and elevates those who have been brought low.

For Paul the gospel is closely bound up with the theme of "praise" (*kauchōsis*).<sup>28</sup> It carries Jer 9:22, 23 (LXX) within it, whether in Rom 3:27-31, in 1 Corinthians 1–4, or in 2 Corinthians 12. The self-praise that the gospel brings to an end is the boasting of the wise, the rich, and the powerful. To them, too, the way is opened to boasting in God, to the praise of God. But that way changes their lives from the ground up. In 1 Cor 11:17-34, in the context of the conflict over the Lord's Supper, the consequences of the gospel for the well-to-do in the community are described. If they are not willing to share their good food with the poor during the ritual common meal of the community they damage the holiness of the community. Holiness and righteousness are inseparably bound up with one another. The rich must leave the community if they are not willing to share. They can eat whatever they want at home (1 Cor 11:22). But in doing so they are no longer members of the body of Christ, for it is continually constituted anew in the Lord's Supper. The gospel changes the lives of the rich and the poor, but in different ways.

## Conclusion

For Paul, talking about the justification, through God's action, of the ungodly and of people embroiled in sin leads to an analysis of the structures and entanglements involved;

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<sup>28</sup> The Greek word is traditionally translated "boasting" (German "Rühmen"), by now an old-fashioned word in German and one that has suffered a fixed association with the anti-Jewish notion of self-praise, self-satisfaction. "Boasting" in English always has negative overtones.

liberating action makes that analysis possible. Individual experiences of suffering and humiliation are brought to expression, especially in the community's songs and prayers of lament. In the act of lamenting before God one realizes one's own complicity. The result is encouragement toward liberating action, despite the experience of the globalization of sin. In the midst of the structures of sin the Torah can be fulfilled, and in the "conduct" of believers it is fulfilled. The Pauline tradition makes it possible for us today to understand the cries of the victims as prayer. And the prayers of the communities that name their own involvement in the structures of death, inspired by the Pauline tradition, can again become a public and liberating outcry.