Conclusion: Pauline Agency in Postcolonial Perspective: Subverter of, or Agent for Empire?

The Problematic Paul

Differences of opinion about the interpretation of the Pauline letters and their reach and effects have been around for a considerable time, as many who encountered them through the ages have found it difficult to come to terms with the letters as well as the legacy of the so-called thirteenth apostle of the New Testament.1 The scene of discontent with Pauline views was set with the early, euphemistic acknowledgement of 2 Peter’s author that in the writings of “our beloved brother Paul” (ὁ ἀγαπητὸς ἡμῶν ἀδελφὸς Παῦλος), “some things are difficult to understand” (ἐστιν δυσνόητά τινα, 2 Pt 3:15–16). Many contemporary Bible readers in church and society face similar difficulties with making sense of Paul’s letters. Such problems are still often believed to stem from socio-cultural and doctrinal differences, and can be traced to difficulties in the letters themselves while others are rooted in subsequent generations’ interpretations of his writings.2


1 Pregeant (1995: 402–412) points out some of these interpretative difficulties, referring to the ambiguous nature of Pauline positions regarding the status and role of women, homosexuality and social activism, and registers limited success in debunking traditional views of Paul as chauvinist, anti-homosexual, and socially conservative. In a different vein, George Bernard Shaw criticised what he perceived as the Pauline degradation or negation of human dignity: “It was Paul who converted the religion that raised one above sin and death into a religion that delivered millions of men [sic] so completely into a dominion that their own common nature became a horror to them, and the religious life became a denial of life” (quoted in Dodd 1996: 12). Sojourner Truth is reported to have vowed after having repeatedly been adjoined to from Paul to be obedient as a slave, never to read from that part of the Bible should she ever become free and learn to read (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992: 154; a similar response to Paul was made by Howard Thurman’s mother; cf. Jones [1984: 6]). In the Christian-Jewish dialogue, “Paul emerged as the major stumbling block” (Von Waldow 1995: 149).

2 Of various studies on the “difficulties” in the Pauline documents and their interpretation, Dodd’s (1996) work is representative.
A hermeneutical problem that has emerged in recent years more strongly than before is the question of Paul’s perceived political (to use a modern term) stance, particularly his attitude towards the Roman Empire. For some time now Paul’s political position towards the imperial authorities has been debated by scholars (see Kwok 2005: 86), with contrasting conclusions. For some, Paul was the signal representative of political conservatism, an advocate and maintainer of the status quo: “Paul, the radical innovator and founder of the Gentile church, sowed the seeds of the acceptability of the world order as it is and passivity towards it” (Rowland 2006: 667). Others have emphasised a vastly different reading of Paul, identifying him as a radical apocalypticist who anticipated and actively worked toward a world turned upside-down, including the downfall of the political powers (Georgi 1991). Such contrasting, uncompromising positions tend to focus strongly on particular sentiments in the Pauline letters to the exclusion of others, and rely on interpretative practices derived from traditional methods of historical or literary criticism.

However, framing Paul’s political stance in radical, binary opposite positions has proved to be unsustainable and too one-sided. Circumventing this conven-

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3 The traditional notion that the struggle of the early Jesus-follower communities was directed more against Greek or Hellenistic philosophies and culture than against the politics of the Roman Empire (e.g. Sanneh 1989: 50–67), begs the question of whether such a distinction between culture and empire is tenable? To what extent can the Empire or the ruler cult, so pervasive in Paul’s world, be equated with either culture or political power to the exclusion of the other?

4 Ambiguity concerning Paul’s engagement with socio-political concerns has been denied by some scholars who have been eager to present Paul as consistently critical of and actively opposed to Empire. All suggestions of social conservatism on Paul’s part; the subordination of communities to a higher missionary ideal; his socio-cultural accommodation and neglect of social justice matters; his notion of love-patriarchalism; his acceptance of a positive role for violence, all without any distinctions, are deemed to be distortions of Pauline thinking (Elliott 1994: 181–182).

5 Space does not allow fuller discussion of the history of the reception of the Pauline texts; two typical elements of the interpretative history of normalising Pauline thinking must suffice: use of a politics of identity and a rhetoric of othering in his letters, as seen especially in his politics of otherness which he constructed by positing various binaries, especially regarding gender. The second concerns his essentialising politics of identity, which through its focus on difference between past and present ensures the construction of sameness between Paul and his communities, as well as “malestream” readerly identification with the apostle and his views (Schüssler Fiorenza 2007: 83–89), as mentioned above.

6 The difficulty that many scholars have in dealing with Rome has been questioned as an expression of racialised discourse, inherited from centuries of scholarship, in which Rome has become epitomised as where “rationality, freedom and mature political power all came