



# The Groans of “Brother Saul”: An Exploratory Reading of Romans 8 for “Survival”<sup>1</sup>

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**I**n a recent article, Brendan Byrne rehearses briefly the “new perspective” on Paul since E. P. Sanders’s seminal work in 1977, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.<sup>2</sup> With its emphasis on the particularity of Paul’s circumstances, the new perspective, according to Byrne, has left us with a dearth of theological ideas that can be drawn from these letters.<sup>3</sup> Byrne intends to offer one attempt to fill the theological void by

<sup>1</sup>I borrow the nomenclature “Brother Saul” from Allen Dwight Callahan’s recently published essay, “Brother Saul: An Ambivalent Witness to Freedom,” *Semeia* 83/84 (1998) 235–250. According to Callahan, the “Paul” of Acts has been preferred by African American interpreters (244). For the use of the term “survival,” see below.

<sup>2</sup>Brendan Byrne, “Interpreting Romans Theologically in a Post-‘New Perspective’ Perspective,” *Harvard Theological Review* 94/3 (2001) 227–241. The ideas or challenges of the “new perspective” as Byrne relates them are as follows: (1) to critique a Lutheran interpretation of Paul; (2) to recognize the continuity between Paul and his letters and Second Temple Judaism, so as not to interpret Paul’s experience as a “conversion” from one religion to another; (3) to highlight the contingency of Pauline letters, including dense theological arguments; (4) to utilize social-scientific research into early church communities; (5) to acknowledge the Gentiles as Paul’s primary audience, from whom he attempts to draw sympathy in his discussions surrounding Israel; and (6) to identify the failure of Israel not in some universal concept of sinfulness, but in ethnic pride and a poor eschatological vision for the inclusion of the Gentiles (228–229).

<sup>3</sup>This short paper, which I initially offered as a lecture at McCormick Theological Seminary (January 2002),

*Many liberation theologians have shunned or opposed Pauline theology, seeing it as having contributed to systems of oppression. But Paul’s emphasis on the groaning of the Spirit implies disorder. It encourages us also to see the disorder and to join the Spirit’s groaning, turning our groans into action.*

arguing that Romans still provides an enlightening overall theological vision that is useful for Pauline studies. His conclusion: “For all of its devastating indictment of human failure and sinfulness, including that of Israel, the gospel shows how through the action of the Son, *continued in the Spirit, God restores human dignity, making human lives embodiments and instruments of the same divine faithfulness (the objective sense of ‘God’s righteousness’).*”<sup>4</sup> Byrne’s thesis is a useful starting point for a recovery of Paul’s theology (if such a dearth exists), particularly in the letter to the Romans.

One problem still remains. If Paul argues, as Byrne suggests, for the restoration of “human dignity,” then why have liberation theologians shunned or, even worse, opposed Pauline theology? A few examples will suffice to illustrate this sentiment:

Neil Elliott summarizes the representative view on Paul’s thought in this manner: “The usefulness of the Pauline letters to systems of domination and oppression is nevertheless clear and palpable.”<sup>5</sup>

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes:

Paul’s impact on women’s leadership in the Christian missionary movement is double-edged. On the one hand he affirms Christian equality and freedom....On the other hand, he subordinates women’s behavior in marriage and in the worship assembly to the interests of Christian mission, and restricts their rights not only as “pneumatics” but also as “women,” for we do not find such explicit restrictions on the behavior of men *qua* men in the worship assembly.<sup>6</sup>

Where is the restoration of human dignity?

#### “BROTHER SAUL” AND AFRICAN AMERICAN INTERPRETATION

For similar reasons, the reading of Paul’s letters from within African American communities has had an ambiguous history. No less a critic than James Cone, the “father” of Black Theology, has emphasized that the Pauline letters were ignored because of their apparent preference for the status quo.<sup>7</sup>

In an oft cited story, Howard Thurman (the educator, pastor, and Christian mystic) tells a story of his grandmother’s refusal to hear from the letters of Paul:

During much of my boyhood I was cared for by my grandmother, who was born a slave and lived until the Civil War on a plantation near Madison, Florida. My

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is not the appropriate forum to question this so-called “dearth.” I wish to thank McCormick’s faculty and administration for their gracious hospitality, especially David Daniels, David Esterline, Lois Gehr Livezey, and Robert Brawley. In addition to helpful comments at the lecture, several colleagues have read and responded to this article before its publication here: Mary Hinkle, Brad Braxton, and Brian Blount.

<sup>4</sup>Byrne, “Interpreting Romans,” 241 (my emphasis).

<sup>5</sup>Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994) 9. To his credit, Elliott’s goal is an attempt “to recover the voice of Paul, a voice stifled and obscured through long centuries of interpretation” (24).

<sup>6</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th ed. (New York: Crossroads, 1994) 236.

<sup>7</sup>James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975) 60.

regular chore was to do all of the reading for my grandmother—she could neither read nor write. Two or three times a week I read the Bible aloud to her. I was deeply impressed by the fact that she was most particular about the choice of Scripture. For instance, I might read many of the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again. But the Pauline epistles, never—except, at long intervals, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. My curiosity knew no bounds, but we did not question her about anything.

When I was older and half through college, I chanced to be spending a few days at home near the end of summer vacation. With a feeling of great temerity I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. "During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves be obedient to them that are your masters..., as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible."<sup>8</sup>

The Thurman tale has become standard "proof" among African American theologians of the tension produced by the reading of the Pauline letters within the black church in this country.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, a "hermeneutics of suspicion" has always been operative when reading Paul's letters. Some scholars have suggested that it was not so much "suspicion" as "survival."

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Reading Scripture through a "hermeneutics of survival"<sup>10</sup> has become (and, some would argue, has always been) the dominant mode of reading Scripture within African American communities. It is an important concept for African American biblical scholars, as both Renita Weems and Vincent Wimbush show in recent essays.<sup>11</sup> In her discussion of Thurman's story about his grandmother, Weems writes: "[T]he experience of oppression has forced the marginalized reader to retain the right, as much as possible, to resist those things within the culture *and*

<sup>8</sup>Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949) 30–31.

<sup>9</sup>Compare Callahan's recent reinterpretation of Thurman's quote in "Brother Saul," 240–242.

<sup>10</sup>The phrase was first established as a technical lens by Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 1–6; see also *The Postmodern Bible: The Bible and Culture Collective*, ed. E. A. Castelli et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 251.

<sup>11</sup>Renita J. Weems, "Reading *Her Way* through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 57–77; Vincent L. Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of Interpretive History," in *Stony the Road*, 81–97.

*the Bible* that one finds obnoxious or antagonistic to one's innate sense of identity and to one's basic instincts for *survival*.<sup>12</sup>

How, then, should we, all of us interested in the appropriation of Scripture for the holistic liberation of humankind, read Paul? There are reasons to have one's critical antennas on alert while reading the letter to the Romans from a sociopolitical liberationist standpoint. The admonition of Rom 13, "let everyone be subject to the governing authorities," has been an interpretive crux for many.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, African American biblical scholars have recently begun to question the assumption of a full-scale rejection of reading Paul. Several (Amos Jones Jr., C. Michelle Venable-Ridley, Allen Callahan, Brian Blount, and Brad Braxton)<sup>14</sup> suggest that the reading of the Pauline letters within African American communities has a more complicated history than absolute rejection, and that value should (once again?) be afforded to Paul, the theologian and, some would add, the "theology enabling liberating ethicist."<sup>15</sup>

Is Paul a "brother," that is, is he one who is committed to a liberation that might resist the oppression of his first-century context *and* set a trajectory for the future? Richard Horsley has argued, rightfully, that Paul should be read against his own cultural context. Horsley concludes, arguably, that Paul expressed thoughts that would have placed him in the camp of liberation and freedom in the first century.<sup>16</sup> More recently Brian Blount has argued that Paul provides "a boundary-breaking theological tendency, and that the liberative quality in his ethics issues from it," *yet* "the apostle...does not in the end always maintain the courage of his own somewhat shocking convictions."<sup>17</sup>

#### THE SPIRIT, GROANING, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN READING

One passage that deserves further attention within contemporary discussions on Paul from a liberationist hermeneutical perspective is Rom 8. A theological dimension exists here that may also be of service to an African American liberationist reading as well. In Paul's letter to the Romans, this dimension centers on the role of the Spirit.

Romans 8:1–39 is often viewed as a transition section within this chief of

<sup>12</sup>Weems, "Reading," 63 (my emphasis).

<sup>13</sup>Howard Thurman suggests that Rom 13 is understandable in light of Paul's Roman citizenship (*Jesus and the Disinherited*, 32–33).

<sup>14</sup>Amos Jones Jr., *Paul's Message of Freedom: What Does It Mean to the Black Church?* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984); C. Michelle Venable-Ridley, "Paul and the African American Community," in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997) 212–233; Callahan, "Brother Saul"; Brian Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh: New Testament Ethics in an African American Context* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) 119–157; Brad R. Braxton, *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup>Blount's chapter title is actually "Paul: Theology Enabling Liberating Ethics—Sometimes," in *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh*.

<sup>16</sup>Richard Horsley, "Paul and Slavery: A Critical Alternative to Recent Readings," *Semeia* 83/84 (1998) 194–196.

<sup>17</sup>Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh*, 123.

Paul's letters. It functions as the conclusion (note the "therefore" in 8:1), even the culmination, to the lengthy discussion on the salvation of humankind, beginning as far back as 3:21, or perhaps even earlier (e.g., 1:18).<sup>18</sup> In addition, it functions as a transition to the demonstration of God's faithfulness towards Israel, chapters 9–11, a section J. C. Beker (among others) describes as the "climax" of the letter.<sup>19</sup>

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***"Paul's doctrine of the Spirit is far more central and characteristic than his doctrine of justification by faith"***

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At the center of this chapter is Paul's discussion of the experience of the Spirit, as he argues for the necessity of "living in the Spirit."<sup>20</sup> What the law could not do, that is, provide a means to righteous living, now "life in the Spirit" should do. As Gordon Fee has recently argued, "For Paul the Spirit, as an experienced and living reality, was the absolutely crucial matter for Christian life, beginning to end."<sup>21</sup> Fee's thesis builds on (and provides corroborating evidence for) what others have noticed previously: "Paul's doctrine of the Spirit is *far more central and characteristic* than his doctrine of justification by faith."<sup>22</sup>

According to verses 1–8, God sent forth Christ and the Spirit in order to accomplish what a "weakened" law could not do (8:3). So that, for Paul, there are two ways of being in the world: the way of the "flesh" and the way of the "Spirit." Paul argues that those who are in the way of the Spirit are those in whom "the Spirit of God dwells" (8:9). This same Spirit, which "raised Jesus from the dead," will "give life" to those in whom she dwells.

The next section, 8:12–17, functions as the conclusion ("therefore") to vv. 1–11. Roman Christians are "debtors" (v. 12) and "children of God," who need not accept a "spirit of bondage," but a "spirit of adoption" (v. 15), an adoption that is not complete until the ultimate *redemption of the body* (8:23). The Spirit, as subject, "bears witness" to those who are true "children" (v. 17). There is one condition

<sup>18</sup>So James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38A (Waco: Word, 1988) 467.

<sup>19</sup>J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 87.

<sup>20</sup>This expression occurs in different forms, but they have the same connotation: "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ" (8:2); "walk according to the Spirit" (8:4); "live according to the Spirit" (8:5); and "set the mind on the Spirit" (8:6).

<sup>21</sup>Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994) 1. Similarly Dunn states, "Consequently it is the Spirit who can be described as determinative for Christian belonging and sonship" (*Romans*, 415). Citing Rom 8:14, Jarena Lee states, "So it may be with such as I am, who has never had more than three months schooling; and wishing to know much of the way and law of God, have therefore watched the more closely the operations of the Spirit, and have in consequence been led thereby. But let it be remarked that I have never found that Spirit to lead me contrary to the Scriptures of truth, as I understand them. 'For as many as are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God'" ("A Female Preacher among the African Methodists," in *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett [Durham: Duke University Press, 1985] 179).

<sup>22</sup>Stephen Neill and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 203 (my emphasis). This shift away from "justification by faith" as the central theme of the letter is part of the paradigm shift in Pauline studies (see note 2 above).

(“if”) that appears to offer externally observable evidence that such “children” are authentic: those who become co-sufferers with Christ (8:18–30). Paul fully exploits his eschatological viewpoint when he professes that “joint heirs” who suffer will eventually “be glorified” (8:30).

Although Paul continues the theme of “suffering” in the next section (8:18–25), it is not clearly defined (cf. Rom 5:1–5). There are, at least, two important facts about suffering that Paul emphasizes (note that Womanist scholars have rightly challenged our understanding and, thereby, our promulgation of the concept of suffering<sup>23</sup>): (1) when viewed eschatologically, suffering has little value (v. 18); it simply cannot compare to the future glory; and (2) suffering does not isolate the individual, but rather connects a person to the entire ecological system: *all creation groans*.

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In verse 26, after a brief aside (vv. 24–25), Paul returns to the theme of the groaning of all creation including the human community. Here, in a chapter where “Spirit” language dominates,<sup>24</sup> Paul now provides a *functional pneumatology*. First, the Spirit is one who assists humans in their weakness. She accomplishes this task by making intercession on their behalf (note the  $\gamma\alpha\rho$ ). Second, and directly related, the Spirit benefits “the children of God” because her intercession is always compatible with the will of God.

There is much more that can be said, but space does not allow. Let me simply note that Paul concludes his discussion of the significance of groaning with a doxology (8:31–39). The period between being “justified” and being “glorified” is a time between the two ages *and* is a time for the groans of the Spirit on behalf of all and through all (8:28–30).

Such groaning suggests the incompleteness of the salvation experience *and* of the fulfillment of God’s righteousness in the present order. Such groaning by “all creation” expresses the unity of the entire creation in this action, the action of groaning.

#### “GROANING IN THE SPIRIT”: A CATALYST FOR (SOCIO)POLITICAL PRACTICAL ACTION

While it may seem that the Spirit is solely a theological category in Paul’s Romans, albeit “an experienced and living reality,” I would like to suggest that the

<sup>23</sup>See Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*; Jacquelyn Grant, “Womanist Jesus and the Mutual Struggle for Liberation,” in *The Recovery of Black Presence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*, ed. Randall C. Bailey and Jacquelyn Grant (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 129–142; and Joanne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in African American Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

<sup>24</sup>Sixty-two percent of the references to *pneuma* (“spirit”) occur in chapter 8 (21 out of 34)!

Spirit's activity of groaning, particularly the act of "groaning" and "sighing" through the entire created order (8:22, 23, 26),<sup>25</sup> is a catalyst for sociopolitical action and change. This groaning is not solely a spiritual act on behalf of one's self, but has sociopolitical implications. Such a dichotomy, between the spiritual and the political (and between the individual and the communal), would be rare in any first-century religious movement. When the Spirit groans in Rom 8 (vv. 22, 23, 26), the groan cries out for righteousness and justice (i.e., "the redemption of the body"!) that hopefully, if not in the present, will occur in the future soon to come. The cry of believers in worship should also motivate and encourage the voices (and actions) of the "children of God" in public arenas on behalf of just causes (8:14–15).<sup>26</sup>

Is Paul, then, a "Brother"? That is, is he interested in the "survival" of the oppressed in Rome? Does Paul wish to preserve the status quo or is he a social critic? Social critics "groan," and real sighs and groans are shared by others in the created order, and, more importantly, such groans are enlivened by the Spirit (of God) who groans through humans. Such groans recognize, by the Spirit, the incompleteness of justice and righteousness in the land.<sup>27</sup>

I grew up in a family in which my father was a "groaner." Before I ever read Rom 8, I could sense the undeniable incompleteness of the society in which we lived. My father groaned often, as a form of prayer. When articulate, his prayers requested the presence and righteous action of God for both the spiritual and sociopolitical redemption of the "downtrodden." When articulate, his prayers demanded that the God of faithfulness act on behalf of the oppressed. When inarticulate, his groans became "prayers" of sadness, of longing, and of hope.

Perhaps Paul's own groans are justified. Perhaps the groans of our forebears may still be heard. Perhaps we, too, should exhale our own sighs and groans for the holistic righteous redemption of this world. We may groan for American Muslims of Arab descent because of intimidation tactics from their "neighbors." We may groan for the continuing challenges of racial inequalities in our educational institutions, seen most recently in the much publicized controversy between Lawrence Summers, President of Harvard University, and Cornel West.<sup>28</sup> We may groan, even, against Paul's own words, and the history of appropriation of those words of "injustice" against the "slave" and the "female."

We may groan as David Walker groaned in 1829 about the false dichotomy between the spiritual and the social-political physical world: "Yet the American ministers send out missionaries to convert the heathen, while they keep us and our

<sup>25</sup>Note how Jesus "groans" (στενάζειν), in Mark 7:34, as he looked to heaven before healing a deaf and dumb man.

<sup>26</sup>I am grateful to Brad Braxton for suggesting this connection.

<sup>27</sup>See Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 151–152, note 9.

<sup>28</sup>"Who is Cornel West?" Online: <http://www.cnn.com/2002/fyi/teachers.ednews/01/10/west.harvard.ap/>.

children sunk at their feet in the most abject ignorance and wretchedness that ever a people was afflicted with since the world began.”<sup>29</sup>

And so, with Paul, may our groans turn to doxology: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, *not ecclesial traditions, not societal mores, not economic disenfranchisement, not the dissolution of affirmative action*, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39; my additions).

Groans imply disorder. Praise implies awareness of God’s sovereignty. The combination of groans and doxology should characterize the human response to a world in which other elements of the created order also groan and praise. These dimensions of prayer (i.e., the groan and the praise) are signs of the “hope” *and* the “suffering” of those in whom the Spirit of God dwells. So, Paul encourages us to groan on! ⊕

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<sup>29</sup>David Walker, “Our Wretchedness in Consequence of the Preachers of Religion,” in Sernett, *African American Religious History*, 190.