

# THE LANGUAGE OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION IN ROMANS

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One cannot begin to investigate the source of the Apostle Paul's theology without taking into account his Judaeo-Hellenistic milieu. What was the formative culture that Paul imbibed? For instance, one dares not delve into the plan and mind of Paul by studying only his Hebrew origins, for it would be wholly inexplicable to do so without a consideration of his Hellenistic education. It is a question of degree: for one must take care not to overemphasize the Greek element in his education, since his writings reveal no cognizance of the higher literature.

An initial problem is the language of universal salvation in Romans. What are the reasons for its origin? Are there, perhaps, oratorical passages in Greek literature, like speeches by military or political leaders embodying the hope of universal victory, that have idiomatic parallels in Romans?

According to Martin Pope, "There is no parallel in his Greek style in his predecessors or in contemporary writers [...] Pauline Greek is that of his age, when the Greek language had been and continued to be subject to the influence arising out of the mingling of races in the Greco-Roman world. Hence it remains an individual achievement in the Epistles, which become a powerful medium of direct personal appeal".<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, at Tarsus, Paul may have been acquainted with some of the Greek classics; and if he heard any Stoic lectures (there was in his days the school of Athenodorus), he would have been conversant with the thought of Plato—perhaps the *Symposium*. In the *Phaedrus*, the closing prayer of Socrates affords a clearer parallel with Paul's distinction between flesh and spirit:

"Such reading, reflection and mixing in the Greco-Roman world may have been seminal in instilling into Paul's mind ... the idea of *unity* and *brotherhood* that

1. Martin Pope, "The Greek Style of St. Paul", *The Expository Times*, xlix 12 (1938) 534-69.

transcended the limits of a city or a tribe, but the conception of universal brotherhood may have remained as yet an abstract and ineffective thought, devoid of a driving plan to move the world.”<sup>2</sup>

For example, Paul’s military and architectural metaphors are vague and were in general use: “Words like to ‘fight’ and to ‘build’ have been coined into the universal language of mankind, and are constantly utilized without any idea of their origin [...] Throughout the military metaphors, some of which are clearly conscious and intended, there are none which even in the slightest degree suggest any real interest and familiarity with military matters; they are quite popular; and there are only two which are constantly Roman in character, all the rest are military in general; they are not Roman any more than are Greek; they relate to the conception of the soldier in general.”<sup>3</sup>

There is, however, an allusion to the completion of the divine saving victory in Col 2, 14-15 in terms of the soldiers in the train of a conqueror-hero’s Roman triumph. Even so, the problem of locating the source of Paul’s victory/salvation language is further complicated by whether we are looking for Hellenistic or Jewish-Hellenistic language that might have crept into the Apostle’s writings. According to A. Schweitzer<sup>4</sup> even Paul’s use of the LXX (= the Septuaginta) does not yield word parallels in his writings, since he may have used Greek scriptural anthologies rather than the standard Greek texts. Paul may have been familiar with other writings, like those of his Judaeo-Hellenistic contemporaries, Philo of Alexandria and Josephus.

But Paul “does not use the ideas which are here offered to him. Jewish-Hellenistic theology is so characteristic a product that it can never be overlooked [...] but in Paul no trace of it can be shown.”<sup>5</sup>

Lately, the argument in favour Paul’s “higher all-round education” (*höhere Allgemeinbildung*) and access to images and idioms in *koine* use, was reiterated

2. W.M. Ramsay, *The Teaching of Paul in Terms of the Present Day*, (London 1913), 31-38.
3. W.M. Ramsay, “St. Paul’s Use of Metaphors from Greek and Roman Life”, *Luke the Physician* etc., (London 1908), 294-297.
4. *Paul and His Interpreters*, (London 1912).
5. *Ib.*, 92.

by Jürgen Becker.<sup>6</sup> But Paul's notion of the human predicament – the dilemma of sin/redemption – cannot be traced back to a specific branch of contemporary thought: "Paul does not have simply a 'Jewish' or a 'Hellenistic' or a 'Hellenistic-Jewish' conception of man's plight. It appears that Paul's thought was not simply taken over from any one scheme pre-existing in the ancient world."<sup>7</sup>

Wherefrom, then, are the origins of universal salvation language in Romans? Ideally, one should focus not primarily on the *language* but on the *mindset* of Paul. Words and terms in Romans and other Epistles like 'adoption', 'faith', 'love', 'charity', 'sin', 'grace', 'salvation', 'Christ/Lord', 'spirit', 'body', 'universal', 'victory', 'righteousness' etc., express Paul's profound grasp of the Christ event in language not used before in Christian literature.

Hence, rather than Greek rhetoric ... primitive Christianity and its animating beliefs and traditions viewed vis-à-vis the sectarian background of Palestinian Judaism, could hold the key to the singularity of Paul's eschatological language of salvation in Romans.

E.P. Sanders' notion of 'participationist eschatology' may help in understanding Paul's fundamental thought: "Salvation for Paul means primarily participation in the new reality created by the advent of Christ." Although Paul's view of universal or limited salvation is not clearly articulated, the notion of 'transfer' thus enabling salvation seems to be the *crux interpretum* to the understanding of his doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

Further, whereas according to Sanders, 'covenantal nomism' was formerly held by Palestinian Judaism to be the norm, i.e. the process of 'staying in' or being born within the covenant of the people of God, Paul's view of salvation was that "... *only* those who 'transfer' [become Christians] will be saved [and] salvation is for all because Christ conquers all; but salvation is nonetheless [...] *only* through Christ."<sup>9</sup>

6. *Paulus der Apostel der Völker*, (Tübingen 1989), 58-59.

7. E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, (London 1977) 554.

8. See M. Eugene Boring, "The Language of Universal Salvation in Paul", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 105/2(1986) 269-292.

9. *Ib.*, 291.

Thus, Paul's view of the human predicament and the 'wrath of God' provide the parameters of his eschatology in the light of Jewish apocalyptic. This view would then exclude any derivation from Greek tradition with its framework of a moral world-view: "The decisive perspective is the eschatological one, which already in Zeph, 1,18 and Dan, 8, 19 allows the last judgement to be called technically the day of wrath."<sup>10</sup> This background has been thoroughly studied by W.D. Davies in his seminal work *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*.<sup>11</sup> Well before Qumran and its documents came into view, Davies thought that "...apocalyptic is especially important in any study of the background of Paul [and] that Paul was acquainted only in the slightest degree with both Greek literature and philosophy."<sup>12</sup>

But in what way does Old Testament apocalyptic inform the plan and language of Romans? According to James D.G. Dunn<sup>13</sup> Paul embraced a form of the Hebraic notion of the two aeons. Within this framework – a beginning in creation leading to an end, and a final judgement – Paul interposed the coming of Christ and his saving grace as the central theme in the human drama of failure and suffering of the new age.<sup>14</sup>

Paul's apocalyptic has close affinities with that of Ezra<sup>15</sup> yet only Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic has a world-redeemer – a messiah – the Lord of the coming age.<sup>16</sup> But there is a difference: Paul passes over the catastrophic end-of-the-world events typical of Judaeo-Christian apocryphal writings. All that Paul looks forward to is the proclamation of universal salvation (Rom 5,18,11) in the sense of the defeat of Satan (Rom 16,20) as a result of Christ's coming.

This means that Paul's language of universal salvation spells out the 'victory' of the 'conqueror' and 'liberator' over the alien threat: sin and death, and not Greco-Roman civilization or its protagonists. This language conjures up figures of God-the-King whose reign extends to include all creation. This salvation is freely available

10. See Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, (Grand Rapids 1990), 33–52.

11. (London 1948).

12. *Ib.*, 10,12.

13. See *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids 1998).

14. *Ib.*, 463.

15. Schweitzer, *Paul and his Interpreters*, 51.

16. (*Ib.*, 193 n.2).

to 'all' mankind as a whole. It evokes images of Christians as 'conquerors' (Rom 8,37). The 'victory' as such, the last fight of Christ Jesus and the Christian community, will be over "angels and principalities, powers of the height and of death" (Rom 8,38-39). Yet even these will be ultimately reconciled to God in Christ: "The material universe will be liberated from thralldom [and] we shall move – at the end – to glorious liberty."<sup>17</sup>

Paul's universalism reveals a mindset informed by the LXX language of prophetic salvation in Deutero-Isaiah, Habakkuk and Ezekiel, as well as in some sections of apocryphal Enoch, Ezra and Baruch. In this literature Jahweh is acknowledged not only as the God of Israel but also as the Ruler, the Lord, of the universe.<sup>18</sup>

Particular importance should also be given to the Qumran literature, since the "salvation-creating power" inherent in Paul's understanding of the "righteousness of God" parallels early Christian eschatology. This language reveals a God who in the end will not only be victorious over the defeated, unrighteous cosmos, but who seems to long for his creation to be reconciled to him.<sup>19</sup>

Although Paul "observed none of the literary conventions of apocalyptic literature",<sup>20</sup> his usage of to "be made righteous" in the sense of to "be justified" is a term indicating "getting in", not staying, in the body of the saved. This is the concept of 'transfer': "The similarity is probably connected with the fact that both in Qumran and in Paul one must 'be converted': join a group [in which] one was not born." Ultimately, with the victory brought about by the death of Christ, the struggle comes to an end and, with the restoration of the divine image, there is hope of future glory and access to the *Praesentia Dei*.<sup>21</sup>

17. C.H. Dodd, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans*, (London 1959), 194.

18. See Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 55–85.

19. See E.P. Sanders, *ib.*, 544.

20. *Ib.*, 544.

21. See D.V. Way, *The Lordship of Christ Ernst Kdsemann's Interpretation of Paul's Theology* (Oxford 1979), 146–147.

Another point in the formation of Paul's language is the use of 'triumphal imagery' and the designation of himself as the "priest of the Messiah" (Rom 15:16-21,23): "In the last resort his [Paul's] metaphor of the priest of the messiah is interchangeable with that of the cosmic conqueror (Cf. 2 10.4ff); on both occasions the subject is the singular mandate and world-wide function of the apostle to the gentiles who places the ungodly at the feet of his lord and sets them in his triumphant procession."<sup>22</sup>

In conclusion ... this kind of doctrine developed by Paul (and John) harks back not to Judaeo-Hellenistic gnosticism but to Judaeo-Christian sectarianism: "Paul and John must have been familiar with the writings of Qumran, or others like them, and whether approving or opposing them, made use of them to formulate and express their Christian message."<sup>23</sup>

Although it is by no means easy to find parallels between Qumran and Pauline literature, there are, for instance, echoes in Romans 3:21-31, 1,17 to some passages in the Thanksgiving Psalms and the hymn in the Manual of Discipline. These hymns "express also a profound sense of the righteousness of God, by which man is given a righteousness he could never attain for himself."<sup>24</sup> This view is also maintained by Joseph A. Fitzmyer "In such ideas [see 4:30-38;9:32-34;14:14-16 in 1 QH=The Hymns and 11:9-15 in 1 QS=The Manual of Discipline] one finds the Palestinian matrix for the Pauline idea of God's righteousness and of justification by faith."<sup>25</sup>

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22. Ib., 140.

23. Pierre Benoît, "Qumran and the New Testament", *Paul and Qumran: Studies in New Testament* Jerome Murphy-O'Connor (ed), 1-30.

24. Walter Grundman, "The Teacher of Righteousness of Qumran and the Question of Justification in the Theology of Paul the Apostle", *ibid.*, 85-114).

25. *Responses to 101 Questions on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, (London 1992), 125-126.