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A Tale of Two Sons of Two Gods: Reading Romans 1:1-7 through a Political-Ideological Lens

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A Tale Of Two Sons Of Two Gods: *Reading Romans 1:1-7 through a Political-Ideological Lens*[1]

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The opening verses of Romans are considerably expanded when compared with other Pauline letters. Here Paul succinctly introduces Jesus Christ as the designated Son of God in power, the king from the Davidic line, and who resurrected from the dead. But *why* did Paul emphasize so? N.T. Wright spells out for us the underlying message:

> We open the first page of Paul's letters as they stand in the New Testament, and what do we find? We find Paul, writing a letter to the church in Rome itself, introducing himself as the accredited messenger of the one true God. He brings the gospel, the *euaggelion*, of the son of God, the Davidic Messiah, whose messiahship and divine sonship are validated by his resurrection, and who, as the Psalms insist, is the Lord, the *kyrios*, of the whole world. Paul's task is to bring the world, all the nations, into loyal allegiance — *hypakoē pisteos*, the obedience of faith — to this

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[1] Excerpted from my dissertation: Hii Kong Hock, *Contesting the Ideology of the Empire: Paul's Theological Politics in Romans, with Preliminary Implications for Chinese Christian Communities in Malaysia* (Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation. Evanston: Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2007), Ch. 2, "Paul's Counter-Imperial Discourse (1): Christ vs. Caesar – Who is the *Kyrios*?"

> universal Lord. He is eager to announce this *euaggelion* in Rome, without shame, because this message is the power of God which creates salvation for all who are loyal to it, Jew and Greek alike. Why is this? Because in this message (this 'gospel of the son of God'), the justice of God, the *dikaiosynē theou*, is unveiled.[2]

In this brief essay, I am using a *political-ideological* reading strategy to interpret Romans 1:1-7 as Paul's challenge against Rome's imperial ideology.

What Good News? Or Rather: Whose Good News?

A close examination of the key terms in these opening verses of the letter will reveal Paul is indeed using politically inflammatory concepts. Paul opens by asserting what he proclaims is the "gospel of God" (1:1 *euangelion theou*), and that which is "concerning his Son" (1:3 *peri tou huiou autou*). Here we find Paul at the interface of his two worlds – Jewish and Greco-Roman – in his use of the term *euangelion*.[3] First, from his

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[2] N.T. Wright, "Paul and Caesar: A New Reading of Romans," originally published in C. Bartholemew (ed), *A Royal Priesthood: The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 173–193. Here at http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Paul_Caesar_Romans.htm.

[3] See N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 40-44; idem, "Gospel and Theology in Galatians," in L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson (eds), *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker* (JSNTSup 108; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, .1994), 222-239; idem, "The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection," in L.E. Keck et al (eds), *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. X (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 415.

Jewish theology, Paul draws particularly from two LXX passages, Isaiah 40:9 and 52:7, which are *apocalyptic* in its very core. They promised Israel that one day it will break free from the Babylonian captivity and return from exile. On the day when YHWH finally intervenes on his people's behalf, he will be enthroned as King in Zion; and it would also mean the defeat of all the spurious gods of the heathen. Though this was not yet fulfilled at Paul's time, such an apocalyptic hope nevertheless remained the core and climactic belief of Jewish people in the Second-Temple period. Secondly, as used in its Greco-Roman context, *euangelion* is a technical term for "news for victory."[4] It also denotes the celebration of the accession or birth of an emperor.[5] Moreover, in the imperial language, the *euangelion* of a royal person always entails with it all the benefactions that come with him. This is obvious once we remember the claim made by the Priene inscription: "The Caesar [Augustus] through his appearance [*epiphanein*] has exceeded the hopes of all former good messages [*euangelia*], surpassing not only the benefactors who came before him, but also leaving no hope that anyone in the future would surpass him, and since for the world the birthday of the god was the beginning of his good messages [*euangelia*]..."[6]

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4 F. Friedrich, "*euangelion*" in G. Kittel and F. Friedrich (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. G. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1974), II:722 (henceforth *TDNT*). See also Wright, "Gospel and Theology in Galatians," 226, n.9.

5 Wright, "Gospel and Theology in Galatians," 226; idem, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," 165.

6 We find the echoes of such sentiment in honor of Augustus in Horace's poem (*Carmen Saeculare*,. 17 BCE): "Already faith and peace and honor and ancient modesty and neglected virtue have courage to come back and blessed plenty with the full horn is seen"; and also in Virgil's *Eclogues* (1.6-8): "It is a god who

Which 'Son of God' Are We Talking About?

Paul's gospel further claims that Jesus Christ is the "Son of God" (*huios theou*). This would certainly have rung a bell in his hearers' ears, for this title was customarily accorded to Augustus and his successors. After the *apōtheosis* (deification) of Julius Caesar, it followed logically that since he was now divine, his adopted son Octavian must be *divi filius*, the "son of a divine one." Even though in the Roman thought, a *divus*, or a deified human, was different from *deus*, an eternal, immortal god, Greek translated both into the same word, *theos*. Titles like *dei filius* ("Son of a God") and *divi filius* ("Son of a Divine One") appear, accordingly, alike in Greek as *theou yios* or *theou hyios* ("Son of God").[5] Octavian initially legitimated his right to rule by appealing to his status as *Imperator Caesar divi filius*, "Caesar, Commander, Son of the Divine."[6] What he initiated was a 'divine' dynasty that ran through Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero who were all honored and immortalized as "son of the

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wrought for this peace—for a god he shall ever be to me; often shall a tender lamb from our folds stain his altar." Cited in Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 17-18.

7 Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves: Sociological Studies in Roman History*, vol.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 202; see John Dominic Crossan, Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 11.

8 J.L. White (*The Apostle of God: Paul and the Promise of Abraham* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999], 188, n. 37) points out, "the finishing touch was put on his public image when, after he received the honorary name of Augustus in 27 BCE, Octavian's full title became *Imperator Caesar divi filius Augustus*."

divine Caesar."[9] When Paul designates Jesus Christ as the "Son of God," his language clearly parodies the divine and theological claim made on behalf of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

Divine Origin, Divine Destiny?

Historical records show Augustus even found ways to connect his *birth* to a divine origin. In Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars: The Deified Augustus* (94.4), Augustus was portrayed mythically as conceived by a human mother, Atia, but via a divine father, Apollo the eternal *deus* who was not only the sun god, the god of medicine and music, but also the god of prophecy. As Crossan and Reed say, "conception by a god of prophecy guaranteed your future, guaranteed you *were* the future, more than any spoken oracle or written text could ever establish."[10] In addition,

[9] H. Maier comments that visual images abounded in Rome during Augustus' rule, all designed "to convince the inhabitants of the Roman Empire that they were governed by an order willed by the gods, with a divinely established ruler, indeed *divi filius* or *huios theou,* as its head." Harry O. Maier, "Barbarians, Scythians and Imperial Iconography in the Epistle to the Colossians," in A. Weissenrieder et al. (eds), *Picturing the New Testament. Studies in Ancient Visual Images* (WUNT 193; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 385-406 (here 386); cited in Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 49, n.288.

[10] For further details on how Octavian/Augustus adopted Apollo into his propaganda, see Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul,* 138-139. D. Potter likewise espouses that in order to legitimate their reigns, a promotion technique often used by Roman emperors was to portray themselves as prophetically destined to be king. The rationale behind this was such that "the monarch had been chosen by the gods, his lot set at conception or birth," and there was "nothing that anyone could do about it." See David S. Potter, *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius* (RA 7; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 146.

the process of *apōtheosis* required that eye-witnesses attested to have seen a 'sign' of the dead emperor. Thus a comet that appeared in the sky following Julius Caesar's death was urgently promoted by Octavian as the sign that Caesar was now included among the heavenly gods. The immediate agenda was, of course, to legitimize Octavian himself as the *divi filius*. To validate his claim, Octavian again alluded to the prophecy of an *haruspex* named Vulcanius, an archaic Etruscan interpreter of heavenly movements.[11]

I submit it is to contest such a claim to divine sonship and prophecy by the emperors – both pertaining to their birth and after-death (*apōtheosis*) – that Paul asserts the *euangelion* concerning the *other* Son of God, Jesus Christ, was the fulfillment of the prophecy promised by God through the double-witness of Jewish "prophets and holy scriptures" (1:2). But what has this to do with Paul's counter-imperial rhetoric? While I concur with J. Weima that "Paul's gospel does not involve some radically new teaching but is in complete continuity with the message of the Old Testament,"[12] I

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[11] So Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 136-137. According to J. White (*The Apostle of God*, 173-191), Paul's presentation of Jesus as 'political Lord' proceeds from the assumption that resurrection was the point of Christ's divine anointing and empowerment; Christ's rule did not begin until after his *apotheosis*. Cf. Tellbe (*Paul between Synagogues and State*, 201) who argues that though reflecting Jewish idea of "being installed into divine sonship," *apōtheosis* certainly parallels the Greco-Roman ruler cults.

[12] Jeffrey A.D. Weima, "Preaching the Gospel in Rome: A Study of the Epistolary Framework of Romans," in L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson (eds.), *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker* (JSNTSup 108; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 341. Similar position is held by James D.G. Dunn, "How New Was Paul's Gospel? The Problem of Continuity and Discontinuity," in L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson (eds.),

think P. Esler is more perceptive that of all the forty-eight occurrences of *euangelion* in the seven epistles reckoned as genuinely Pauline, only here does Paul say of it as being "foretold" (*proepēngeilato*) in the Hebrew scriptures. Significantly, the word is built on *–angellomai*, a paronym of *euangelion*.[13] Given prophecy was customarily used to validate the Caesar's birth and reign, I reckon by such a double-use of *euangelion*-related words, Paul is undermining the emperor's version of *euangelion* by drawing from Jewish theology. This is further supported by the force of the middle voice of *proepēngeilato*, used to emphasize the subject of the promise – "which God promised," "which he promised on his own behalf."[14] Dunn rightly points out that with the double emphases *dia tōn prophētōn* (through *his* prophets), a rare expression, and the only occurrence of *en graphais hagiais* (in the holy scriptures) in the NT, Paul is asserting God's "personal involvement in and authority behind the prophetic hope."[15] Paul's rhetoric here must be viewed as countering the Caesar's use of prophecy for legitimizing his birth and reign. Over against such 'human ways,' Paul would assert the *euangelion* of Jesus Christ is divinely authenticated by God himself.[16]

Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker (JSNTSup 108; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 371; idem, *Romans 1-8* (WBC 38A; Dallas: Word, 1988), 22; and Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 43-44.

13 Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 136. Unfortunately, Esler only reads it as Paul's way of retrieving his mainly illiterate audience's "collective memories of God's dealing with his people."

14 Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 10.

15. See discussion in Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 10-11.

16 Jewett, *Romans*, 103.

Much can be said as to whether by asserting Jesus as God's Son being descended from Davidic line *kata sarka,* "according to the flesh," (1:3) is meant Jesus' "humanity," especially when its antithesis is Jesus' resurrection *kata pneuma,* "according to the Spirit" (1:4) which is taken to mean Jesus' "divinity." Interpreters like Fitzmyer, Dunn and Wright have all variedly pointed out the "resurrection from the dead" marked Jesus as the Son of God for all.[17] Though helpful in many ways, it is unfortunate that such discussions have all discounted the context within (or rather, *contest with*) Caesar's imperial theology. I surmise Paul's emphasis on the "fleshly, human" birth of Jesus and his "resurrection from the dead" is yet another derision of the Caesar's self-claimed "mythical, divine" birth and *apōtheosis*. I also want to suggest Paul's claim that Jesus Christ was declared "Son of God with *power* according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead" (1:3-4) is another sarcastic nuance. The resurrection of this Jesus, the *other* Son of God can be read as a purposeful challenge to those 'dead' Caesars whose *apōtheosis* lacked the 'power' to do likewise.

Who's the Real King, the Lord?

Paul's counter-imperial rhetoric becomes even clearer once we see the close connection between the concepts 'Son of God' and 'Messiah,' both of which carry royal overtones. Paul challenges Caesar's claim to kingship by establishing Jesus as a royal descendant from the Davidic lineage "according to the flesh" (1:3). Notice, however, Paul's assertion of

[17] For more discussions, see J.A. Fitzmyer, *A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 234-237; Dunn, *Romans 1-8,* 12-16; Wright, "Romans," 417-418.

Jesus' kingship is already found at the outset when he introduces himself as a *doulos Christou Iēsou*.[18] Though often transliterated in English as "Christ," *Christos* is perhaps best understood in its Jewish form as "Messiah" which carries richer royal overtones. As Wright explicates, "The Messiah is the anointed king of Israel who in Scripture was supposed to be the ruler of all other earthly monarchs (e.g. Ps 72:8-11; 89:27; Isa 11:1-4)."[19] The kingship of the Messiah is further substantiated by the oft-overlooked royal overtones in the title "Son of God" which, again according to Wright, can refer to "the king, adopted as YHWH's firstborn son – the seed of David (1 Sam 7:14 [cf. 4Q174 10-13; 4Q246 2:1]; 1 Chr 17:13; Ps 2:7; 89:26-27)."[20] Paul version of *euangelion* is provocative: he proclaims Jesus the Jewish Messiah – rather than the Roman Caesars – as the royal king and 'Son of God.'

Conclusion

The late philosopher Jacob Taubes expresses most revealingly the political overtone in these opening verses found in Romans 1:1-7:

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[18] The counter-imperial overtones of *doulos Christou Iēsou* is well expounded by Michael J. Brown, "Paul's Use of *doulos Christou Iēsou* in Romans 1:1," *JBL* 120:4 (2001): 723-737.

[19] Wright, "Romans," 415.

[20] Wright, "Romans," 416, n. 20. This finds support in Dunn (*Romans 1-8*, 11-12, 23) who suggests "Son of God" is used in varied ways, including oriental rulers, king of Israel, great philosophers, Jewish rabbi, of mankind as a whole, of Israel as a whole, or of the righteous in particular. Contra, however, Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 235) who rejects "Son of God" as being used in any messianic sense, since – he contends – there is no OT background relating it to "Messiah."

> This is a declaration of war, when a letter introduced using these words, and no others, is sent to the congregation in Rome to be read aloud. One doesn't know into whose hands it will fall, and the censors aren't idiots. One could, after all, have introduced it pietistically, quietistically, neutrally, or however else; but there is none of that here. This is why my thesis is that in this sense the Epistle to the Romans is a political theology, a political declaration of war on the Caesar.[21]

So it is. But Paul's contrast of the two sons of two gods does not stop here. Thus the challenge for Paul's interpreters is to see how he would continue to critique the cultural values and power ideology of the Roman Empire throughout the whole letter to the Romans.[22]

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[21] Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul,* trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 16, 118-119.

[22] See Hii, *Contesting the Ideology of the Empire, passim.*

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