The Groans of “Brother Saul”: An Exploratory Reading of Romans 8 for “Survival”

EMERSON B. POWERY

In 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. 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. Byrne intends to offer one attempt to fill the theological void by

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.

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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’).” 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.”

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.

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.

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

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.

4Byrne, “Interpreting Romans,” 241 (my emphasis).

5Neil 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).


7James 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.”

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. 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.”

Reading Scripture through a “hermeneutics of survival” 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. 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

9Compare Callahan’s recent reinterpretation of Thurman’s quote in “Brother Saul,” 240–242.
10The 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.
the Bible that one finds obnoxious or antagonistic to one’s innate sense of identity and to one’s basic instincts for survival.”

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.

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) 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.”

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. 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.”

**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

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12 Weems, “Reading,” 63 (my emphasis).
13 Howard Thurman suggests that Rom 13 is understandable in light of Paul’s Roman citizenship (Jesus and the Disinherited, 32–33).
15 Blount’s chapter title is actually “Paul: Theology Enabling Liberating Ethics—Sometimes,” in Then the Whisper Put on Flesh.
17 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). 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.

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

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.” 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.” 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.”

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...
(“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 suffering²³): (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,²⁴ 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 γενέσθαι). 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 (SOCIOPOLITICAL) 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


²⁴Sixty-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), 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).

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.

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 socio-political 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. 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

25Note how Jesus “groans” (σπνεύω), in Mark 7:34, as he looked to heaven before healing a deaf and dumb man.
26I am grateful to Brad Braxton for suggesting this connection.
children sunk at their feet in the most abject ignorance and wretchedness that ever a people was afflicted with since the world began.”

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!

EMERSON B. POWERY is visiting professor at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is an associate professor of New Testament and chair of the department of theology at Lee University (Cleveland, Tennessee). He is one of the editors of the African American Commentary on the New Testament (Augsburg Fortress, forthcoming).

In her past life she was obsessed with the brother of the Villainess, Alexei, but seeing him in real life is so much better than in the game! It's just that, her brother's upbringing is just so sad that she cries every time she thinks about it! Okay! I'm going to escape mine, and my country's destruction flag and make sure everyone lives happily! With her common sense and knowledge of history she plans on saving her brother and overcoming all the game events. For some reason, as time went by her talented brother became more and more of a siscon. Wait no, he was a siscon to begin with but, she's more than happy to spend more time with her brother as a brocon and siscon. And as time went by, her plan to avoid the Heroine and the Prince death flag has become more and more messed up. Why? Romans 1 Romans 2 Romans 3 Romans 4 Romans 5 Romans 6 Romans 7 Romans 8 Romans 9 Romans 10 Romans 11 Romans 12 Romans 13 Romans 14 Romans 15 Romans 16. Bible Bible Hub Parallel Reader's Bible Cross References TSK Quick Links New International Version New Living Translation English Standard Version New King James Version Strong's BSB Strong's YLT Strong's NASB Strong's KJV Strong's HCSB Alphabetical Listings A Faithful Version American King James American Standard Version Aramaic Plain English Berean Literal Bible Berean Reader's Bible Berean Study. ◄ Romans 8 ►. New International Version. Par ▾. "Life Through the Spirit.\(^\text{12}\) Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. The Groans of 'Brother Saul': An exploratory reading of Romans 8 for 'survival. Jan 2004. Word World. 315-322. E B Powery. Powery, E.B. "The Groans of 'Brother Saul': An exploratory reading of Romans 8 for 'survival," Word & World, (24/2004), 315-322. The Meaning of St. Paul's Antithesis 'The Letter and the Spirit'. 163-207. Hoek, M. "Suffering and Weakness in Romans 8:14-39, with Particular Reference to the Role of the Spirit," Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Manchester, 2005. Recommended publications. Discover more. Romans - Chapter 8. Catholic Online. Bible. Free World Class Education FREE Catholic Classes. Romans Chapters. And as well as this, the Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness, for, when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words; 27 and he who can see into all hearts knows what the Spirit means because the prayers that the Spirit makes for God's holy people are always in accordance with the mind of God. 28 We are well aware that God works with those who love him, those who have been called in accordance with his purpose, and turns everything to their good.