

The Presence of the Past: The Scholarly Afterlife of *Adversus Judaeos* Rhetoric

PETER SPITALER

Villanova University

I learned a great deal from Fredriksen's book, and I assume other readers will equally benefit from studying her analysis of Augustine's defense of Jews and Judaism. Of particular interest to me are the book's early chapters. They describe the changing cultural and religious environment for the equally evolving social and literary interaction between Jews and other ethno-religious groups in the centuries leading up to Augustine's time. These descriptions, in turn, prepare the stage for Fredriksen's presentation of Augustine's own dealings with Jews, rhetorical or real, in his many writings.

As Fredriksen unfolds, before the reader's eyes, the reception history of the *Adversus Judaeos* rhetoric that Augustine both inherited and transformed, she shows that this particular genre is embedded in, and retrievable from, literature, like artifacts strewn across the pages of the educated among Christian authors and Church leaders who dominated the literary and ecclesio-political landscape of the first four centuries. With their prolific literary productions and reproductions, the ancients liberally disseminated *Adversus Judaeos* rhetoric. At times, they simply repeated the ever more readily accessible rhetorical arguments of predecessors and contemporaries. Other times, they tweaked these arguments to such a degree that subsequent generations of Christian writers were able (deliberately or not) to misinterpret the prototypical, intra-Judean arguments of first century (New Testament) authors and broadcast them—amplified and virtually unchecked until Augustine raised his pen—as stereotypical contra-Judean diatribes.

Reconstructing the origins and reception history of *Adversus Judaeos* rhetoric necessitates interpreting the literary evidence. In this regard, contemporary scholars face the same epistemological questions as the ancients did: What can we know, and with what degree of certainty? In part, Fredriksen bases her reconstruction on a traditional presuppo-

sition or hypothesis, shared by many scholars, concerning the ethno-religious identities of the recipients of Paul's letters: namely, non-Israelite audiences residing in various cities (Rome, Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica) and provinces (Galatia) of the Roman empire.

In my opinion, this particular hypothesis is in serious need of revision. If it were accurate, because Paul published attacks on his contemporary, fellow Israelites in letters to non-Israelite audiences, we would have to assume that he intentionally aired in-group problems where they could be heard by outsiders, possibly to convince them of the accuracy of his positions and the superiority of his own rhetoric. To be sure, Paul included only those debates with fellow Judeans that portrayed him as a winner, and his personal authority vouched for the precision of his claims. Still, Paul himself would have provided the literary matrix for constructing literary—rhetorical or symbolic—Judean lives and identities and deconstructing them before non-Israelite ears. These straightforward observations have far-reaching implications for our understanding of the past.

First, if Paul indeed wrote to non-Israelites about his quarrels with Israelites, he would, in a moment, cease being a bystander innocent (as he is often portrayed to be) of setting in motion the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of *Adversus Judaeos* rhetoric. Rather, he would emerge as the earliest culprit of this kind of polemic popularized later on a much larger scale. Thus, if our basic assumptions about the circumstances of Paul's literary creativity are correct, distortions of Judean identities likely began sooner than Fredriksen admits.

Second, next generation authors could no longer be conceived of as guilty of a dual offense: misreading Paul's argumentation and transforming it into condemnations of Judaism. If the ancients reconstructed the historical setting of Paul's letters in the same way we do today (that is, in accordance with the above stated hypothesis), it would follow that they simply continued a rhetorical tradition legitimized and authorized by Paul: that it was rhetorically justifiable and politically opportune to attack Judeans *in absentia* for the purpose of strengthening nascent Christian identities and theology. Consequently, on this account, we would have to say that they neither misrepresented Paul's argumentation nor transformed intra-Judean rhetoric into contra-

Judean polemic—for it was not intra-Judean to begin with. By definition, an intra-Judean debate is a debate among Judeans. If Paul sent his letters to non-Israelite Jesus group members, he did not debate with Judeans but wrote to fellow Jesus group members about Judean life and identity. More precisely, he crafted and used Judean characters in his letters to debate with them rhetorically. But the real purpose would have been pedagogical: to teach non-Israelites by attacking Judeans who had no voice but Paul's own. Is such a strategy not at the heart of *Adversus Judaeos* rhetoric?

For some time, I have been convinced that Paul did not write to non-Israelites, and Fredriksen's book reinforces this opinion despite her taking for granted the traditional, contrary position. The present roundtable is not the place to discuss alternatives, but her reconstruction, or any scholarly work on Israelite religion for that matter, can benefit from the findings of Malina and Pilch (2006) that Paul might have attempted to preach his gospel in person and letter to fellow Israelites, Hellenized Judeans living far away from the homeland, that is, Judeans dispersed throughout the Roman empire, and not non-Israelites ("Gentiles"). According to that scenario, Paul's letters provide evidence that he deconstructed the opinion of fellow Israelites who interfered with, or rejected, his gospel. However, his at times heated literary riposte to Israelites was not publicized for non-Israelite audiences; Paul actually engaged in intra-Judean debates—with Israelites before Israelites.

Of course, the problem of reconstructing the beginnings of *Adversus Judaeos* rhetoric is more complex than identifying possible audiences for Paul's letters. There is strong consensus among scholars (Stowers 1981; Thorsteinsson 2003) that Bultmann (1910) and others after him (Cranfield 1977; Fitzmyer 1993) got it right: Paul's argumentation, in particular in his Letter to the Romans, exhibits the characteristic features of a literary genre known as diatribe. Using rhetorical characters for the sake of a literary debate, Paul frequently writes in the style of a "lively pedagogical discourse" or as if engaged in a "loose style of conversation with an interlocutor, spiced up with exclamations, idioms and maxims, rhetorical questions, paradoxes, short statements, parodies, fictitious questions, antitheses and parallel phrases" (Fitzmyer 1993).

In other words, second person addresses are essential elements of his letters (see, for example, “you are inexcusable, human.” Rom. 2:1; “you are called Judean,” Rom. 2:17).

Whereas the genre of diatribe requires the presence of a rhetorical character in the text, diatribe makes no assumption about the historical accuracy of this character’s words or actions. After all, a rhetorical character is a literary construct and may or may not exist in reality. Which raises the question: If Paul communicated with rhetorical characters about their conduct and the conduct of other (rhetorical or real) characters, how did and does the reader or hearer of his letters identify as factual or fictional the conduct that these characters exemplify? Put differently, diatribal characters undoubtedly are real in the text and act in the text; but to what extent are their identities and actions fictional beyond the text? The answer to these questions is less historical in nature than epistemological or, more accurately, steeped in interpretive choices. The literature of the first few centuries shows that its authors over and over again chose to animate rhetorical characters (mostly fashioned to be Judeans) to claim they were real factually. Presumably, early Christian writers assumed Paul accurately portrayed Judeans in his letters; they extrapolated general characteristics of Judean life from his literary portrayals. They literally “realized” them, that is, breathed life into them and gave the characters “real” identities and historical credibility. All of a sudden, literary creations became clear mirrors of historical realities. The problem was, of course, that most ancients exploited Paul’s literary critique of fellow Judeans for constructing the kind of negative moral and religious biographies, individual and corporate, that sustained *Adversus Judaeos* argumentation.

We may ascribe to the ancients theological arrogance and social ignorance—but what excuses do we find for *Adversus Judaeos* interpretation bubbling to the surface of contemporary scholarly articles and commentaries on New Testament texts? Seemingly ignorant of the past, exegesis too often produces readings that echo the anti-Israelite statements of the past. Why? William Campbell (2006) suggests that “a negative image of Judaism and a corresponding antithesis with emergent Christianity” continues to constitute “the framework of modern critical Pauline interpretation”; Douglas Campbell (2005) diagnoses a

“latent insensitivity to Judaism.” Be that as it may, Fredriksen’s book shows that situating Judaism within its historical settings remains as much a challenge as assessing Paul’s view of Judaism. How easy it remains to transform a perceived Pauline critique of Judaism into factual negative portrayals of Israelites and Israelite religion! It does not come as a surprise then that contemporary scholarship continues to deconstruct Israelite religion, assuming this is what Paul himself did. For example: Carras (1992) holds that Romans 2:1–29 contains “perhaps the most extensive and direct critique of Jews and Judaism in the letters of Paul.” The rhetorical questions in Romans 2:21–22 are a concrete demonstration of the moral failure of “Jews” (Tobin 2004). Being called a “Jew” (Rom. 2:17), “Jewish” self-awareness (2:19), and pride in the law (2:23) are the hallmarks of a self-righteous identity (Gager 1983). Even the positive statements of Romans 2:14, 27 concerning non-Israelites keeping the law reveal the failure of “Jews” (others did what “Jews” failed to do; Boers 1994; Pesch 1983). Lists of “Jewish” shortcomings frequently contain “Jewish” disobedience (Gager 1983); presumption about “Jewish” privilege (Lincoln 1995); proud claims of “Jewish” superiority (Seifrid 1992); the misguided religion of “the Jews” (Dunn 1998); lack of repentance (Stuhlmacher 1989); typically “Jewish” status confidence (Dunn 1998); typically “Jewish” assertions about moral superiority and national privileges (Watson 1986); boasting in the law (Theobald 2000); complacency based on covenantal nomism (Chae 1997).

Of particular concern is the lack of recognition of positive Judean identities. In addition to calling fellow Israelites his brothers (Rom. 9:3) and chosen people (Rom. 11:5) who historically trust God’s love (Rom. 11:28; 15:7) and whose relationship with God is defined by sonship, glory, covenant, law, cult, ancestry, and promises (9:4–5), Paul portrays his people to be entrusted with “God’s oracles” (Rom. 3:2)—a law to be upheld (3:31). In contrast with non-Israelites (Rom. 2:14), Judeans have a name and are proud of God (2:17). They grow up in the law, find truth and knowledge in the law, teach others (2:18–19), and are heart-circumcised; God appreciates them (2:29). However, these descriptions are absent from Fitzmyer’s (1993) list of positive Judean qualities. They are also not ranked among Mayordomo’s (2005)

descriptions of just conduct in Romans 2; and Chae (1997) argues for the necessity of a negative interpretation of these verses.

When all is said and done (that is, when we panoptically read contemporary literature on Paul's Letter to the Romans), we discover in his text the portrayal of a self righteously judging (Rom. 2:1.3), paradigmatically law-breaking (2:17–24) “Jewish” partner in a literary dialogue who embodies the “real” or factual problem of first-century Israelite religion.

Contemporary forms of *Adversus Judaeos* thought are driven, not by the need to define religious and theological boundaries, but, I surmise, by longstanding theological presuppositions. I wonder if this was the case also in antiquity. For example, the theological *dictum* that humankind is sinful guides many a scholar (Boers 1997) to unearth from Paul's text hints that Judeans “also” or “especially” belonged to sinful humanity. One commonly discovers the conclusion (Fitzmyer 1993; Watson 1986) that “universality of human sinfulness” can be established, with the help of Paul's text, by (1) setting the perceived sinfulness of non-Israelites (Rom. 1:18–32) against perceived Judean sinfulness (2:1–3:8); and (2) demonstrating that among non-Jesus group members upright people living moral lives simply did not exist, despite Paul's assertions to the contrary (Rom. 2:13, 14, 25–27). His use of diatribe supposedly trivialized positive expressions of Judean conduct (“doing the good” and “doing the law” [Rom. 2:7, 10, 13]) and neutralized positive Judean identities (“being law” and “having the *gestalt* of truth in the law” [2:14, 20]). Put differently, scholars frequently ascribe different stages of realness to literary descriptions of immoral and moral conduct: the former are anthropologically real or factual, the latter hypothetical or rhetorical. No wonder that positive Judean characters disappear from the text (and from history) in the interpretation processes: to comply with the above mentioned theological *dictum*, Judeans who “do the good” and “do the law” (Rom. 2:7, 10, 13) and “have the *gestalt* of truth in the law” (2:20) become “unreal” characters. In contrast, it remains legitimate to identify a “real” Judean behind the allegedly negative portrayal of a “rhetorical” Judean (2:17).

Evaluating the socio-religious realities of first-century Judaism with the help of a perceived “Pauline critique” of Judaism is problematic.

From an epistemological perspective, this mainstream approach is most unsatisfactory because it takes Paul's own constructions of Israelite identities at face value. Apparently, Paul's use of "literary" dialogue partners (characters *in the text* like the Judean of Rom. 2:17) is thought to convey a universal truth about "real" people (persons in the world *beyond the text*). Granted, Paul argues his case with the help of diatribe; and in diatribe, the distance between real audience and fictitious dialogue partner is often minimal (Thorsteinsson 2003). However, even if one were to conclude that the diatribal figure of the Judean (Rom. 2:17) was a literary figure with negative moral characteristics, literary data are lacking to support the *universalization of immoral Judean conduct beyond the text* (Spitaler 2008). Here, the theological *dictum* of universal sinfulness appears to guide attributions of factional or fictional realness to characters and their conduct *in the text* and people in the world *beyond the text*. The time has come to assess Paul's characterizations with the same kind of suspicion that the portrayals of, for example, Pharisees in the gospel literature receive. Today, no serious scholar argues that the gospel authors' presentation accurately reflects historical Pharisees.

Presumably, contemporary scholars attempt reconstructions of the past from the vantage point of knowing that previous efforts simply were wrong, such as the ones that provided the socio-political and theological rationale, disguised as "historical," for *Adversus Judaeos* rhetoric. That is to say, in post-*Adversus Judaeos* and post-Holocaust times, one's assessment of Paul's portrayal of Judeans and Judaism is never scholarly neutral. This is especially true when it comes to choosing labels for identifying the ancients, like the Jesus group members with their diverse ethno-religious and cultural biographies (Paul lists, among others, "Barbarians," "Judeans," "Israelites," "Hellenists" [Phil. 3:5, Rom. 1:14, 2:9, 10, 3:9; 1 Cor. 1:18–31]). At some point, even historical analysis is vulnerable to succumbing to the seductive power of tradition. Fredriksen's choice—albeit informed by alternatives and therefore reluctant—of calling the earliest participants in the Jesus group (Israelites and non-Israelites) "Christians" and Israelites "Jews" is, in my opinion, evidence of the influence that tradition in general, and terminological convention in particular, has on interpretation.

If the above cocktail of summary statements from contemporary literature fails to reveal that first century Israelites are far too frequently labeled collectively “the Jews,” consider the following statements.

- a. “Rom. 2:1–5 most likely refers to the Jews because it is the Jews who would consider themselves morally superior due to possession of the law.... 2:1–4 make it clear that the works of the Jews are evil” (Schreiner 1993).
- b. “If the structure and context of the argument of Romans 2 are considered, the argument itself requires that he who sits in judgment above others [2:1] is the ‘Jew’” (Carras 1992).
- c. In Romans 2, the “entire race of Jews” is addressed as law-breakers (Burnett 2001).
- d. “The Jews attempt to fill shoes that are much too large for them, and they fail lamentably” (Blumenfeld 2001).
- e. “Paul is here treating a fault which was common among Jews, *as a human problem*” (Seifrid 2004).
- f. “The covenant people have become part of the problem, not the agents of the solution” (Wright 2005).
- g. Romans 2:17–24 reveal the “inclination of Jews” to do what is wrong in spite of circumcision (Fitzmyer 1993).

Admittedly, there is little consensus about nomenclature. However, one of the important insights I gained from studying Fredriksen’s book is that, with respect to *Adversus Judaeos* rhetoric, one’s choice of vocabulary indeed matters. In a work that analyzes the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of this particular polemic, even an ever so cautious embrace of a labeling tradition that already many call anachronistic and inherently flawed appears to be counterintuitive and contrary to the evidence; it is, in Fredriksen’s (2008) words, just another way of endorsing the “language of the winners.” In this case, however, the winners are those who succeeded in establishing a hermeneutics of historicity that embraces misnomers as irrefutable facts. Siding with the “winners” is not inherently problematic, but attempting to reconstruct the past with terminology that reinforces the reception history of *Adversus Judaeos* rhetoric is. After all, it was the repetition of *Adversus Judaeos* rhetoric, its concepts

and argumentation, that kept it alive throughout the centuries. Arguably, applying anachronistic terminology to the ancients results in precisely a subtle perpetuation of aspects of the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition. When applied to people living in the first century, the label “Jews” reduces historical “Judeans” or “Israelites” to merely rhetorical characters, and the labels “Christians,” “Christian Jews,” and “pagan Christian” (Fredriksen 2008) classify as historical characters that, from the perspective of the first decades of the first century, are purely rhetorical.

In works on historical phenomena, any label other than “Christian” and “Jew” for the earliest Jesus group members is historically more accurate and therefore hermeneutically more desirable. For quite some time now, social scientists and others (see Malina and Pilch 2006; Esler 2003; Elliott 2007) have worked hard at dispelling the language ghosts of the past and present and developed alternative vocabulary: Judeans, Israelites, non-Israelites, Hellenists, Jesus group members, etc. Not that I think it necessary that historians pursue “activist” strategies in their writings. However, the reception history of *Adversus Judaeos* rhetoric has shown one thing to be true: the written word is never neutral. Because *Adversus Judaeos* rhetoric is an ugly beast waiting to be unleashed and devour again, repeating the misnomers of the past is rhetorically as powerful as substituting for them historically more accurate (a factual judgment), and therefore better (a value judgment), terminology.

References

Blumenfeld, Bruno

- 2001 *The Political Paul. Justice, Democracy and Kingship in a Hellenistic Framework*. Ed. S.E. Porter. Vol. 210, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series. London: Sheffield Academic Press.

Boers, Hendrikus W.

- 1994 *The Justification of the Gentiles. Paul's Letters to the Galatians and Romans*. Peabody: Hendrikson.
- 1997 Agápê and Xáris in Paul's Thought. *CBQ* 59: 693–713.

Bultmann, R.

- 1910 *Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2009

Burnett, Gary W.

- 2001 *Paul and the Salvation of the Individual*. Vol. 57, Biblical Interpretation Series. Leiden: Brill.

Campbell, Douglas A.

- 2005 *The Quest for Paul's Gospel. A Suggested Strategy*. Vol. 274, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series. London: T&T Clark.

Campbell, William S.

- 2006 *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity, Library of New Testament Studies* 322. London: Clark.

Carras, George P.

1992. Romans 2: 1–29: A Dialogue on Jewish Ideals. *Biblica* 73: 183–207.

Chae, Daniel Jong-Sang.

- 1997 *Paul as Apostle to the Gentiles. His Apostolic Self-Awareness and Its Influence on the Soteriological Argument in Romans, Pater Noster Biblical and Theological Monographs*. Carlisle: Pater Noster.

Cranfield, C.E.B.

1977. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans 1, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

Dunn, James D.G.

- 1998 *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Elliott, John H.

- 2007 Jesus the Israelite was Neither a “Jew” nor a “Christian”: On Correcting Misleading Nomenclature. *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 5(2): 119–154. doi:10.1177/1476869007079741

Esler, Philip F.

- 2003 *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A.

- 1993 *Romans: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 33, *The Anchor Bible*. New York: Doubleday.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2009

Fredriksen, Paula

- 2008 *Augustine and the Jews. A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*. New York: Doubleday.

Gager, John G.

- 1983 *The Origins of Anti-Semitism. Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Haacker, Klaus

- 1990 Der Römerbrief als Friedensmemorandum. *New Testament Studies* 36: 25–41. doi:10.1017/S0028688500010845

Lincoln, Andrew T.

- 1995 From Wrath to Justification. Tradition, Gospel, and Audience in the Theology of Romans 1:18–4:25. In *Pauline Theology 3: Romans*, ed. D.M. Hay and E.E. Johnson. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress.

Malina, Bruce J. and John J. Pilch

- 2006 *Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Mayordomo, Moisés

- 2005 *Argumentiert Paulus logisch? Eine Analyse vor dem Hintergrund antiker Logik*. Vol. 188, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Pesch, Rudolf

- 1983 *Römerbrief*. Vol. 6, *Neue Echter Bibel NT*. Würzburg: Echter.

Schreiner, Thomas R.

- 1993 Did Paul Believe in Justification by Works? Another Look at Romans 2. *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 3: 131–158.

Seifrid, Mark A.

1992. *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme*. Vol. 68, *Novum Testamentum Supplements*. Leiden: Brill.
- 2004 Unrighteous by Faith: Apostolic Proclamation in Romans 1:18–3:20. In *Justification and Variegated Nomism 2: The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D.A. Carson, P.T. O'Brien and M.A. Seifrid. Tübingen, Grand Rapids: Mohr, Baker.

Spitaler, Peter

2008. Diatribe and the Construction of a Negative Pauline Anthropology. *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 84(4): 445–475. doi:10.2143/ETL.84.4.2033454

Stowers, Stanley Kent

- 1981 *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans*. Vol. 57, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series. Chico, CA: Scholars.

Stuhlmacher, Robert

- 1989 *Der Brief an die Römer*. 14 ed. Vol. 6, *Das Neue Testament Deutsch*. Göttingen, Zürich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Theobald, Michael

- 2000 *Der Römerbrief*. Vol. 294, *Beiträge zur Forschung*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Thorsteinsson, Runar M.

2003. *Paul's Interlocutor in Romans 2. Function and Identity in the Context of Ancient Epistolography*. Vol. 40, Coniectanea Biblica New Testament Series. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.

Tobin, Thomas H.

- 2004 *Paul's Rhetoric in Context. The Argument of Romans*. Peabody: Hendrickson.

Watson, F.W.

- 1986 *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach*. Vol. 56, *Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wright, N.T.

- 2005 *Paul. Fresh Perspectives*. London: SPCK.