

Old Glory - Ross Hyman
<http://www.vineandfigtree.blogspot.com/>
Preached at Wellington United Church of Christ
Transfiguration Sunday, February 18, 2007
Exodus 34:29-35, Psalm 130 (instead of Psalm 99)
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2, Luke 9:28-36

Paul probably never dreamed that his letters would attain the status of scripture and would be read through as thick an interpretive veil as Paul thought that his opponents applied to the Torah. Indeed to this very day, whenever Paul is read a veil lies over our minds.

In the past several decades, Christian and Jewish theologians have explored the interpretive veil applied to Paul's writings which produces the view that the law is a crushing burden designed only to stomp out our self-righteousness so that we will turn to Christ's grace for forgiveness.

These theologians assert that this interpretation can only thrive when people have veiled themselves to the abundance of God's forgiveness within Judaism, as evidenced by Psalm 130 for example. Jewish writing from the period presents views essentially identical to that of Paul, that the covenantal law is a gift, not a burden; We follow it out of faithfulness and because it is the way to express our love for God and neighbor, with no illusion that our salvation or justification exists anywhere else but in God's redeeming grace. Paul's opponents are

presumably gentiles or Jews on the periphery of Jewry, who would have thought of Jewish laws like pagan rituals, so that they would have associated a promise of magical saving effect working through them, instead of viewing them Jewishly, as expressions of faithfulness.

But there are still disturbing things in Paul's letters, even when looked at through the veil of the new perspective. In today's lectionary text Paul appears to cast dispersions on Moses himself. The fading or setting aside of the Glory appears to apply to the entire Torah. It appears that Paul's attack is aimed at mainstream Jewry, not the periphery, and is focused on its very origins. It appears that anti-Semitic Christian writers, at least in some cases, were quoting Paul without distortion. If the new perspective is correct, then Paul did not really mean these things as they sound. The perspective tells us what Paul hopefully means but it doesn't explain how he could be so sloppy and brazen in how he tried to say it.

It might appear to an onlooker than a flag burner sees nothing redeemable in the symbolism of the American flag. The flag means domination through violence, genocide of Native Americans, enslavement of Africans, military coups in Central and South America, and endless war. It might appear to us that, to the flag burner, these aspects were inherent to the flag from the

moment of its inception, born in a war between two aristocratic classes. To the flag burner, it appears that the American flag, like the confederate flag or the Nazi flag is unredeemable.

But flag desecration alienates lots of people who don't support U.S. policies, past and present, but who see the flag as a symbol of our allegiance to the ideal republic of liberty and justice for all and our allegiance to the idea of working to make the U.S. more like this ideal. We know that the flag burner believes in liberty and justice for all as well. We know that the flag burner derives these notions from the same sources that led to the composition of the Pledge of Allegiance. And if the flag burner were young we would assume that they had just not yet learned to use these symbols in an effective way. But if a mature person was to burn the flag, we have reason to wonder about them a little.

There is no need to find an excuse for everything that Paul wrote. For one thing, nobody is obliged to think that everything that Paul wrote was very thoughtful. Paul was a person like you or me and we are not very thoughtful a lot of the time either. Rabbinic traditions says that Moses was the most humble man who ever lived, and had the presence of mind to veil himself when not teaching the Torah so that people would not associate the pleasure of the radiance with anything else he said. Paul might

have been bolder than Moses but he wasn't wiser. There are more thoughtful ways to say that gentiles do not need to partake in circumcision or dietary laws, or festivals to be considered full members of the covenant community, if that is indeed what Paul had meant here.

We are also under no obligation to find an excuse for everything that Paul wrote if we can find evidence from other Christian writings close to the time of Paul that finds Paul disturbing for the same reasons we do. Perhaps, despite all of Paul's other good points, he was a hotheaded flag burner, who alienated Jews, even messianic Jews, because the thoughtless way he said things made them feel that when push came to shove, when the crunch really came, they weren't sure whose side he would be on.

I believe that such disparagement of Paul exists in several places in Luke-Acts and that Luke's most serious criticism of Paul is in Acts 22:24-29, where Paul, in Jerusalem, has just been rescued from an angry mob by the Roman tribune.

The tribune directed that Paul be brought into the barracks, and ordered him to be examined by flogging, to find out the reason for this outcry against him. But when they had tied him up with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, 'Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?' When

the centurion heard that, he went to the tribune and said to him, 'What are you about to do? This man is a Roman citizen.' The tribune came and asked Paul, 'Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?' And he said, 'Yes.' The tribune answered, 'It cost me a large sum of money to get my citizenship.' Paul said, 'But I was born a citizen.' Immediately those who were about to examine him drew back from him; and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him."

Paul proclaims, for his salvation, a privilege bestowed on him by the domination system that persecutes the Jews. By doing so he answers the tribune's question about why there is an outcry against him. Perhaps the only thing that Luke could have done to bring his point home more strongly would have been to have a cock crow after the third time Paul asserted his Roman citizenship.

Luke's criticism of Paul is also visible in Luke's account of the transfiguration. As if to directly counter Paul's claim that the glory of Moses is dimmed, Luke writes of Moses and Elijah that "Suddenly they appeared in glory," a detail not found in Mark's or Matthew's account.

So how did it happen, that if for the most part Paul's writings are supportive of Jewish positions, and even where they are not, there are significant other voices including pro-Jewish gentile

voices in early Christianity that were critical of Paul's hyperbole, and perhaps even questioning of his basic loyalties, how is it that the church became so anti-Jewish? How is it then that within a few hundred years the Church would have thrown off its Jewishness like burdensome chains and proclaimed that it was a Roman citizen?

This I can't answer but I do want to point out a correlation between hostility towards Judaism, the embrace of the domination system, and hostility towards nonviolence in Christianity.

There are several parables of Jesus, in particular, those that feature a King or a Lord, in which the traditional interpretation is anti-Semitic and supportive of the domination system, while an alternative interpretation is both pro-Jewish and non-violent.

Consider Matthew's wedding banquet story. (Matt 22 2-13)

A king gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Several refused to go. Others killed the king's slaves. The king, enraged, sent his troops, slaughtered the murderers, and burned their city. Then he invites other guests and when the king came in to see them, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how

did you get in here without a wedding robe?" The man was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

In an explanation, read through the veil of the domination system, The King is Jesus. The people who reject Jesus and don't want to go to his wonderful banquet are killed. Guess who they are? And other apostates who don't adhere to proper Christian practice should expect to be thrown into the outer darkness as well. This explanation is more or less what I find in most commentaries even the liberal ones.

Now, reading the same parable through the veil of the suffering servant, the King is the domination system. He sends out his tax collectors but the people refuse to pay. The King sends out his thugs and some of the people violently kill them. The King's response is collective punishment. He destroys the entire city and kills everybody living there regardless if they were part of the insurrection or not. This was well within the experience of Jesus' Jewish audience. They knew that if you rebel violently against the Roman occupation then overwhelming violence will be the response. Jesus teaches an alternative way of resisting. If you want to resist the king and the domination system, do so defiantly, but also nonviolently, and publicly to decrease the

likelihood that people who are not participating in the action will be punished. Sometimes a visual effect, in silence, is more powerful than words. You should not expect any glory from this or any success that you can discern for yourself. In fact you should only participate in such an action if you are prepared to experience the most severe punishment. But it is only through these kinds of actions that the domination system can be effectively resisted and redeemed.

The commentaries might not understand the parable this way but some of the Pharisees did. It is upon hearing this parable that they confronted Jesus about paying taxes to the Caesar.

It is my hope that one day, the same kind of mainstream theological effort that tore off the anti-Semitic veil that had obstructed the reading of Paul for centuries will be applied to Jesus' parables so that all will be able to see that the Kings and Lords in these parables are representatives of the domination system, and that those who resist them violently are Jews, and that those who resist them nonviolently are Jews too.