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*Merold Westphal, editor*

# St. Paul among the Philosophers



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### THREE

## Historical Integrity, Interpretive Freedom: The Philosopher's Paul and the Problem of Anachronism

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In 1583, Matteo Ricci entered China. Trained in philology, philosophy, and rhetoric by Jesuits in Rome, gifted at languages, Ricci was uniquely suited to his mission: to bring the heathen Chinese into the Church. Once he finally held in his hands the religious literature of this foreign culture, however, he made a surprising discovery. Ricci saw (though the Chinese had not) that the ancient scriptures of Buddhism and Taoism revealed the clear imprint of the Christian Trinity.

I thought of Matteo Ricci as I made my way through Professor Badiou's essay on Paul and universalism. Postmodern Paris is no less far from Paul's Mediterranean than Renaissance Rome was from Ming dynasty China. And Badiou's sense of discovery and recognition when reading the Pauline epistles, which he communicates with excitement and conviction in his book, echoes what I imagine would have been Matteo's experience of Taoist Trinitarianism. Such recognition opens interpretive possibilities and closes cultural gaps. And indeed, in the title of his opening chapter, Badiou proclaims the erasure precisely of this gap between Paris and Philippi, between the present and the past. "Paul," states that chapter's title, is "our contemporary."

Such a position is a hard sell to historians. (We are "the heathen" in my analogy.) It is true that, like philosophers, historians look for meaning in texts (as also in other kinds of data). And it is true that, like philosophers, historians through their interpretations of those data seek to generate meaning, to render the evidence intelligible.

But the frame of reference for historical interpretation is not and cannot be the present. To do history requires acknowledging difference between us and the objects of our inquiry. Historical interpretation proceeds by acceding

to the priority of the *ancient* context. Our frame of reference is the *past*. In our particular instance, this morning, for example, my question is not, What *does* Paul mean? that is, to us. Rather, I ask, What *did* Paul mean? that is, to his first-century contemporaries—sympathizers, admirers, opponents, enemies. They, not we, were the audience of his message. He was obliged to be intelligible not to us but to them.

This intelligibility can be alarmingly elusive. Consistency does not rank among Paul's strong suits. In fairness, this impression may be due to the nature of our evidence. We have only seven authentic letters composed, it seems, fifteen to twenty years after Paul joined this new messianic movement. They are real letters addressed to particular communities, occasioned by specific incidents: our grasp of their context is often conjectural. The texts of these letters have certainly altered over time. Thanks to generations of copyists, we no longer have the letters as they left Paul's mouth. And the literary integrity of individual letters is uncertain. Scholars have argued that our present versions of Philippians, 2 Corinthians, and Romans represent various epistles edited together. All this means that, in terms of Paul's "thought," coherence often has to be distilled or imposed.

The deutero-Pauline letters, also preserved in the New Testament collection, make this same point from a different direction: 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus came from other Christians in the generation following Paul's who saw themselves as standing in a tradition that he had established. They accordingly authorized their own statements by writing in his name. The positions taken by this second group of authors vary significantly among themselves and differ markedly from some of Paul's. That Paul was so widely interpreted by those who stood so close to him should caution us about the difficulties of construing his thought. Put succinctly, often Paul shoots from the lip.

How, then, shall we define and identify Paul's ideas on universalism? And how shall we understand them? In light of the messiness of the primary evidence, I propose that we approach this question obliquely. Before turning to Paul himself, let's see what happened to him once he strayed among the philosophers—not modern ones but ancient ones.

I will begin this investigation not with Paul, then, but with two of his greatest ancient interpreters. Each of these later readers of Paul expended great effort to render Paul a coherent universalist, and they worked philosophically no less than exegetically in order to do this. These two later readers disagreed sharply with each other, even though they constructed their respective positions by appeal to precisely the same passages in Paul.

According to Origen of Alexandria (187–254 CE), our first interpreter, Paul's message was that all would be saved. According to Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE), our second interpreter, Paul's message was that all should be damned. According to Origen, every rational being has free will; according to Augustine, humanity can only sin. According to both Origen and Augustine, God's two great characteristics are justice and mercy. But Origen's God expresses these attributes simultaneously: he is both just and merciful. Augustine's God expresses these attributes serially and selectively: he is *either* just *or* merciful. For Augustine, even babies, if unbaptized, go to hell. For Origen, even Satan will at last attain redemption, for God wants nothing less.

Paul's discussion in Romans 9 clinches both arguments, for both men. Let's see what each of them had to shape in Paul in order to get where he wanted to go. What these two great Christian theologians reject or finesse, I will argue, can provide us with a glimpse of what our mid-first-century itinerant Jewish visionary was actually talking about.

But first, a little more context. Both Origen and Augustine were driven to Paul not only because of Paul's prominence in the canon, but also because of Paul's prominence with their opposition. Other Christian churches had formulated their theologies through strong misreadings of the apostle. As Origen makes his constructive arguments, then, he does so against the challenge of Valentinian Gnostics and the followers of Marcion. And at Augustine's back stand the Manichees.

These three heretical communities, though distinct, shared several points of principle. They all repudiated the god of the Old Testament as well as his book. They repudiated matter and flesh as his particular medium. They read the charged pairs of Pauline rhetoric—flesh and spirit, circumcision and baptism, law and gospel, Jew and gentile—as polar opposites, and they constructed their own vision of Christianity uniquely around what they saw as the positive pole. They held that Christ had not actually had a fleshly body, but that he had appeared, as Paul proclaimed, "in the likeness of man" and "in the form of a slave" (Phil 2:6). And they held, accordingly, that as Christ was not raised in a fleshly body, neither would the redeemed believer be. Instead, salvation meant redemption *from* the material cosmos, this world of flesh. The individual soul, fallen into this lower universe, would slip back up through the material cosmos of the lower god to the realm of spirit and life and light, the kingdom of Christ's father. Flesh would remain where it belonged, in the realm below the moon. As Paul had said, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor can the perishable put on the imperishable" (1 Cor 15:50). And who were the saved?

Those “spiritual men” (*pneumatikoi*) or “perfect men” (*teleioi*) to whom Paul disclosed “secret and hidden wisdom” (1 Cor 2:6–7). Unspiritual men (“soul-ish,” *psychikoi*) cannot understand a spiritual message (v. 14). People, in short, were saved in accordance with their intrinsic nature. Will was moot.

We come, then, to Origen. In his great work of systematic theology, the *Peri Archôn* or *On First Principles*, Origen presented a vast vision of “true” Christianity, coordinating, in four books, his understanding of God (Book I), the cosmos (Book II), free will (Book III), and scripture (Book IV). Through allegorical interpretation, spiritual understanding, stated Origen, the Jewish Bible could be revealed to be a book of Christian witness: its god is the father of Christ. Obscure passages of scripture, whether in the Old Testament or in the New, were placed there by divine providence in order to stimulate diligent believers to seek out the hidden wisdom of *lectio divina*. This was so because the nature and structure of scripture, Origen explained, recapitulated that of the time-bound human being. “For just as man consists of body, soul and spirit,” he says, “so in the same way do the scriptures, which have been prepared by God for man’s salvation” (IV.2.4). The body of the text corresponds to its simple narrative, and perhaps to its historical meaning. The eye of flesh can see this level, the uneducated can understand it. The soul of the text is those teachings that edify one’s own soul. But the spirit of the text is its deepest or highest significance. This meaning can be understood only with mental effort, the striving of the mind; and it is on this level of spiritual meaning that the exegete attains an understanding of the mind of God.

In this schema as elsewhere, Origen asserts the priority of spirit over matter. Its priority is ontological, and therefore moral as well: spirit is “good.” As an ancient thinker, and specifically as a Middle Platonist, Origen could hardly have thought otherwise. The ultimate source of everything, however, is *purely* spirit, God himself. Origen identifies this god as Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Again, as a member of the third-century “true Church,” he could hardly do otherwise. Despite this three-ness, however, the Christian god exhibits the characteristics of the high god of pagan *paideia*: he is self-existing, where everything else is contingent. He is perfect, which means he is changeless. And he is absolutely without any kind of body. *Only* God is *asomaton* (I.1.6). Everything that is not-god has body of some sort.

Given this god’s radical changelessness, how can he be a “creator”? Origen answers ingeniously with his doctrine of double creation. Before time existed—which is to say, before matter existed—God presided over a universe of eternally generated rational beings. These rational beings, since not-god, did have bodies, but they were (as Paul says in 1 Cor 15) “spiritual bodies.” “Body”

here serves as a principle of individuation: in the spiritual, eternal realm, it distinguishes one rational being from another. These beings were “made” in “the image of God” through God’s perfect image, his Son. The meaning of this divine image of the Divine Image is spiritual and moral. These creatures had an absolutely unimpeded capacity to choose between good and evil. Put differently—and in the idiom of Greek moral philosophy rather than in the biblical idiom of Origen’s theology—free will is constitutive of rational being.

Again, only God is, by nature, changeless. Not-god, since contingent, will have an innate tendency to change. Since it is innate, this tendency is not culpable. But in the world before time, this natural tendency had consequences.

To explain how we got from a timeless spiritual creation to everything else, Origen evokes the idea of souls (or their love) “cooling.” (This idea refers *psyche* “soul” to *psychesthai*, “to cool,” Plato’s famous wordplay in the *Timaeus*.) Origen explains that all but one of these rational beings wavered in its affectionate concentration on their Maker. That one more constant being, through the free exercise of its own will, loved God with such ardor that it fused with its “object,” the Logos (II.6.3): the soul of Jesus thus merged with the godhead of Christ. All the other rational beings slipped away—some, like Satan, to the maximum degree imaginable. But this slippage, since “natural,” was *not* culpable: God could not with justice “punish” his creatures for not being him, or for being not-him. What was culpable, however, was that these rational beings failed to brake their decline, to move their will in order to arrest their turn from God. Different beings “stopped” at various “distances” from God. Then God, both just and merciful, “acted” to affect their redemption: out of absolutely nothing, he called matter into being (II.1.1–4).

“Now since the world is so very varied and comprises so great a diversity of rational beings,” observes Origen, “what else can we assign to the cause of its existence except the diversity in the fall of those who declined from unity in dissimilar ways?” (II.1.1). The diversity of circumstances and of material bodies expresses the diversity of moral responses that these souls made to their decline from God and the good. God in his mercy and justice, in other words, arranged the wonderfully plastic medium of matter, or “flesh,” to accommodate all these different ethical levels of accomplishment or failure. God places the rational being into a particular historical material body in order to assist it on its way back to God.

The entire material universe, in other words, is a temporary and providential order, a school for souls. And every soul began life in exactly the same way: Jesus’ soul, your soul, my soul, Satan’s soul, the souls of the sun and the moon and the stars. All of our different kinds of bodies register the moral trajectory

of our freely willed decisions. If all souls had not begun from a condition of exact equality, God would not be just, whether as creator or as judge.

God in his mercy and justice placed the soul of each fallen rational being into precisely the sort of material circumstance that it needed in order to freely choose to do the right thing, and eventually (re)turn toward God. God is patient and infinitely resourceful. His providence micromanages the material universe; he has all the time in the world. (And since rational beings are eternal, so do they.) The material body, in other words, is a temporary and propaedeutic device. Once every rational being has finally learned what it needs to learn in order to freely choose to love God, matter will sink back into the nothing whence it came. Ethnicity, gender, social station: all the contingencies of historical existence drop away at redemption (cf. Gal 3:28). The “saints” will rise in their “spiritual bodies.” Even Satan and his minions will come round: anything else would represent a failure on God’s part. But God cannot fail. And he loves all his creatures equally. God throws no one away.

To prove the reasonableness of all these propositions—that the Bible must be understood spiritually; that the soul has a long history of ethical choices before it appears in a historical, fleshly body; that God providentially cares for all his creatures; that if God is just (and he is), then the choice of the will must be free—Origen, in Book III, turns particularly to Paul. “Let us see how Paul reasons with us as being men of free will and ourselves responsible for our destruction or salvation” (III.1.6). Origen then attends to Romans 9. There Paul refers to three biblical passages notoriously hard to reconcile with a strong idea of moral freedom: the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, the choice of Jacob over Esau, and God’s forming persons as a potter forms clay pots, some as vessels of honor and some as vessels of dishonor. “These passages,” Origen observes, “are in themselves sufficient to disturb ordinary people with the thought that man is not a free agent, but that it is God who saves and who destroys whomever he will” (III.1.7).

First, to Pharaoh. Obviously he did not sin by nature, because then God would not have needed to harden his heart to ensure his disobedience. God’s hardening Pharaoh proves just the opposite: that it was within Pharaoh’s power to choose to obey. So why does a good and just God intervene in Pharaoh’s decision by “hardening” him (III.1.9–10)? The phrase, explains Origen, is a scriptural *façon de parler*. Just as a kind master will say to his servant who has been spoiled through the master’s forbearance, “It was I who made you wicked,” or “I am to blame for these offenses,” so the Bible speaks of Pharaoh’s heart being hardened: the fleshly level of the Exodus story presents God’s forbearance as a kind of complicity in Pharaoh’s sin. But in reality—seen from

the perspective of eternity—God “allows” Pharaoh his freedom because Pharaoh *is* free. And God, master of providence, also knows that by Pharaoh’s obstinacy other souls became obedient (like those of the Egyptians who chose to leave Egypt with Moses). Finally, God also knows how, through plagues and the drowning in the sea, “he is leading even Pharaoh” (III.1.14).

But God works with Pharaoh well beyond the borders of the Exodus story. “God deals with souls not in view of the fifty years of our life here,” says Origen, “but in view of the endless world. He has made our intellectual nature immortal and akin to himself, and the rational soul is not shut out from healing, as if this life were all” (III.1.13). Behind these biblical episodes, as behind this life itself, stands the endless shining plain of Origen’s cosmology and soteriology. And behind both of these stands Origen’s ethics (if we want to look at this philosophically) or rather his commitment to the god of the Bible (if we want to look at this religiously): God is both just and merciful. He loves all his creatures. He wants all his creatures to turn back to him, and he arranges matter, thus history, to facilitate his purpose: the education of the rational soul to freely chose the Good.

Origen’s cosmology nullifies the need for theodicy. In light of eternity, there is no evil, only various learning situations. Thus any difficulty with Jacob and Esau disappears: “The reasons why Jacob was loved and Esau hated,” he explains, “lie with Jacob before he came into the body and with Esau before he entered Rebecca’s womb” (III.1.22). (“Hate” of course is another scriptural *façon de parler*.) Humans do not exhaust the category of intelligent life. People, stars, and demons also make themselves, through their uncoerced choices, into vessels of honor or dishonor. But God himself is the impartial lover of souls, swaying considerate scales. The image of the potter, from the prophets via Romans, is actually a statement of God’s scrupulous fairness. “Every soul in God’s hands,” urges Origen, “is of one nature, and all rational beings come, if I may say so, from one lump,” the *phurama* of Romans 9:21.

Origen was born in 187 in Alexandria. He died in Caesarea in 254, a belated victim of the Decian persecution. His language was Greek, his philosophical education superlative. It helped, of course, that he was a genius. Trained in rhetoric and philology, he worked with rabbis on the Hebrew text behind the Septuagint.<sup>1</sup> He was comfortable with interpretive ambiguities, frequently proffering multiple opinions on non-doctrinal issues and inviting his hearer to choose whichever one struck her as more reasonable. He was a lay teacher and a charismatic lifelong celibate. (Indeed, so untroubled was his asceticism that two posthumous rumors arose to account for it, one that Origen’s serenity was achieved by drugs [Epiphanius], the other, by the knife

[Eusebius, on Mt 19:12].<sup>2</sup> His circumstances and his temperament could not have been more different from Augustine's.

I will spend less time on Augustine because his theology is so much more familiar. Origen's represents the road not taken. We still live with the consequences of Augustine's theology, and of Augustine's Paul.

Augustine was North African, born in 354, well after the imperialization of the Christian denomination favored by Constantine. His only language was Latin. Augustine could not read Greek, and so he was limited to scripture in translation not only for the Old Testament but also for the New. His knowledge of Greek philosophy and of the rich tradition of Greek patristic commentary, Origen's included, was also limited to what he could get in translation.<sup>3</sup> It helped, of course, that he too was a genius, although (to quote Gibbon) "his learning is too often borrowed, his arguments too often his own."

But, more to the point, Augustine was not a lay professor. He was a bishop of the imperial church. This meant that he had political and institutional incentives to be clearer on doctrine than Origen the layperson ever had to be. For one thing, by Augustine's day, doctrine translated socially into policy. By the fourth century, heretics were persecuted by the Christian state. Augustine was one of the theological architects of this policy of coercion.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, Augustine came of age theologically just as the storm clouds of the Origenist controversy, turbulent and highly charged, gathered and blackened the ecclesiastical landscape of the West.<sup>5</sup> Theories of the soul's preexistence suddenly seemed uncomfortably close to dualist heresy. And as souls became more incarnate, so too did history. Eternity fell away as the meaningful arena of God's saving action shifted to this world. The faithful recited creeds asserting their belief in the resurrection, not of the body, but of the *flesh*. The eternal fires of hell burned too attractively to be renounced or explained away. And nobody wanted Satan to be saved.

Different context, different interpreter, different temperament, different theology—and accordingly, a different Paul. Between 392 and 396, Augustine produced a steady stream of commentaries, short think pieces, and essays on Paul's epistles. He returned repeatedly, especially to Romans, as he tried to find his feet. Finally, in the months before he wrote his early masterwork, *The Confessions*, Augustine arrived at a reading of Romans 9 from which he never wandered.<sup>6</sup> He won the war of exegesis against Manichees, against Donatists, and against the philosophical theology of his own conversion eleven years before. The queen gambit in this match was the freedom of the will.

Contemplating the figure of Pharaoh, Augustine concluded that God did harden Pharaoh's heart because God was justly punishing him for his

sins. So too with the election of Jacob over Esau: God did choose Jacob and reject Esau before either was born—and before either had done anything good or evil. (For Augustine, the soul begins its life with and in the fleshly body.) Why then were Pharaoh and Esau rejected? "Is there injustice with God? God forbid" (Rom 9:14; *ad Simpl.* 1.2.16). But then how did God judge between them? Answered Augustine: God only knows. Piety demands that the believer assert that God must have had good reason, but those reasons are known only to him: they are *occultissimi*, "most hidden." *Aequitate occultissima et ab humanis sensibus remotissima iudicat*: "He judges by a standard of justice most hidden and distant from human measure" (*ad Simpl.* 1.2.16). We can never know why God does what he does.

Not that God need do anything, Augustine insists. After the sin of Adam, the entire species became a *massa luti* or *massa perditionis* or *massa peccati*. All these images refer to Paul's *phurama* in Romans 9:21, the clay from which the divine potter shapes his pots. After Adam, says Augustine, all humanity is literally a lump of sin. Condemnation is all anyone deserves. God in his justice leaves most people in that condition, and they have no right to complain, since they were "in Adam." "Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" But in his gracious mercy, God mysteriously does elect a few to salvation. Why? On what grounds? Augustine again answers with Paul: Who has known the mind of God, or who has been his councilor? His judgments are unsearchable, his ways past finding out (Rom 11:33; *ad Simpl.* 1.2.22). Humans should be grateful that God has, for some mysteriously chosen individuals, relaxed his righteous wrath.

For both Origen and Augustine, then, the clay of Romans 9 is an image of the equality of all souls. But Origen's souls are all equal in nature, which means that they all have free will. Further, in emphasizing that God works this clay, Origen reiterates through Romans 9 that God is, so to speak, the parent of the souls. He loves his creation. Ultimately he will ensure that all are redeemed. Augustine's souls, by contrast, are all equal in sin. His potter is a judge, and a seemingly arbitrary one at that. (Piety demands that we censor the thought.)

How can a just god condemn men who cannot help but sin? On this question Augustine expends enormous forensic finesse. Man cannot help but sin, but that does not mean that his will is not free. It is simply divided, lacking willpower, in punishment for the sin of Adam. *But nothing outside the will forces the will to sin: the will, uncoerced, sins because it chooses to sin*. It cannot choose other, but its choice is still, in this sense, free (*ad Simpl.* 1.2.21).

Augustine projects this understanding of the divided will back onto his reading of Romans chapter 7. The divided "I" of Romans 7—wanting to do good

but able only to do evil, delighting inwardly in the law of God but captive outwardly to the law of sin—had been understood to be a rhetorical presentation called *prosopopeia*, “speaking in character.”<sup>7</sup> With a kind of rhetorical ventriloquism, Paul throws his voice into that of the sinner who is not yet “in Christ.”<sup>8</sup> But Augustine eventually insists that Paul here speaks of a man who is already “in Christ,” under grace, because only such a man could rejoice in God’s law, if only inwardly. Despite the reception of grace, this man is still a sinner.

So said Augustine in 396. Decades after he made this argument, facing off against the Pelagians in the 420s, Augustine will later insist that the I of Romans 7 was none other than Paul himself (*de praed. sanct.* 1.4.8). Thanks to Luther, this reading still has some cachet: Badiou proclaims that Paul is here “manifestly speaking about himself, almost in the style of Augustine’s *Confessions*” (p. 81).

Paul himself, I’d wager, would disagree. (I certainly do.) After all, as he wrote in Philippians, “If any man thinks that he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the community, as to righteousness under the law blameless” (Phil 3:4–6). If ideological consistency is not Paul’s strong suit, neither is anguished introspection. He is no Origenist, and no Augustinian either.<sup>9</sup>

I examine both Origen and Augustine on Paul at such length to make my point about philosophical interpretation and anachronism. We have seen how both theologians interpreted Paul within their respective systems. Their reliance on philosophy, the intellectual framework of their theologies, helped each of them to produce a more consistent apostle. What could not be accommodated to their respective models through reinterpretation they either drop or ignore. Badiou, of course, though committed to a very different philosophical framework, performs similarly. All three appropriate from Paul what each finds usable. All three translate via reinterpretation what can be used in service of articulating the newer system (Origenist universal salvation, Augustinian universal condemnation, or Badiou’s universal post-Marxism). And all three insist that it is the apostle, not they, who speaks.

Our three different readers drop different things. But what all three drop is Paul’s apocalyptic. Origen’s eternity is so vast that even his vision of the End lasts forever. The sweep of eschatological excitement in the finale of Paul’s letter to the Romans is to the tempo of the *Peri Archôn* what the Seventh Symphony is to *Bolero*.

Augustine de-eschatologizes Paul in another way. His theology is ostensibly more historical. (Your fleshly body, for example, really is in Augustine’s

view a part of who you are, not just something into which you’ve been temporarily dipped.)<sup>10</sup> But by relocating the hermeneutical center of gravity in Romans from 11–15 (the letter’s eschatological finale) to Romans 7, Augustine retrained our way of looking at Paul. His Paul speaks of existential conflict, not of cosmic redemption. For Augustine, the second coming of Christ in his resurrected body has already occurred, at Pentecost, with the establishment of his body, the Church. Augustine, the fourth-century bishop of the imperial Church, is not staying up late at night waiting for Jesus to come back; neither, consequently, is his Paul.

Badiou de-eschatologizes Paul by concentrating so resolutely on the resurrection as a contextless “event.” It’s just *there*, punctiliar, isolated, dominating everything. An event (as the older German theologians used to say) in the history of consciousness. But Christ’s resurrection is *not* that for the historical Paul. Paul was a mid-first-century visionary Jew, not an early-twenty-first-century postmodern Parisian. The significance of Christ’s resurrection for Paul is that it indicates what time it is on God’s clock. It’s the end of history, and the hour of the establishment of God’s kingdom. The form of this world is passing away (1 Cor 7:31). Salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand (Rom 13:11–12). Christ is the firstfruits of the general resurrection (1 Cor 15:20). His rising means that the transformation of history is imminent (1 Thess 4:13–17). Further, the god who will bring about that transformation is an ethnic god, the god of Jewish scripture, the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Gentiles may have been added in, but it’s the god of Israel who has done all the heavy lifting, just as he had promised the (Jewish) patriarchs (Rom 15). Paul’s universalism is both heavily mythological and specifically ethnic.

Millenarian movements always succeed as their major prophecy fails. The kingdom of God arrived neither in Jesus’ lifetime, nor in Paul’s—nor in Mark’s, nor in the lifetime of John of Patmos. Grass has grown through Akiva’s cheekbones, and still the Messiah has not come, or come again. That is simply an observation. But it need not represent a theological problem.

Theological readings of foundational religious texts are intrinsically anachronistic. Their categories of meaning come from outside and well after the categories native to the authors of the foundational texts. To read such texts theologically means to read them philosophically (theology is a subset of philosophy) and thus systematically (hence the *-logy* of these endeavors). Badiou gives us a post-Lacanian example of such a systematic and systematizing project: God may be missing, but nothing else is. Systematic rereading is how these ancient Jewish eschatological texts that are Paul’s letters

retain—or, rather, *obtain*—contemporary meaning. There is no dishonor in this. It is theology's project.

But in view of its inevitable anachronism—its falseness to the messiness, the opacity, the stubborn independence, the sheer otherness of the past that is the context of foundational texts, such as Paul's—such a reading can only be false to the original author. I wish that practitioners of such projects would say, "I interpret Paul this way, this is what Paul means to me," a hermeneutical claim, rather than "this is what Paul means," a historical claim. As a historical claim, such assertions can only be anachronistic; and an anachronistic historical claim can *only* be false, whatever ideological merit it might otherwise display.

"The historian meets the gap between himself and others at its most sharp and uncompromising," Peter Brown once observed. "The dead are irreducible."<sup>11</sup> They are certainly freed of any obligation to make sense to us. If we as historians seek to understand how people in the distant past made sense to each other, then we have to work hard to reconstruct their world, not to project upon them concerns from ours. The ancient dead stand with their backs toward us, their faces turned to their own generation. The dead are not our contemporaries, and if we think they are, we are not listening to them, but talking to ourselves.<sup>12</sup>

I am making an epistemological claim here, namely, that only a historical interpretation of such texts can give us at least an approximation of what the ancient subject thought. Ancient humans, like their modern counterparts, are gloriously inconsistent intellectually and morally, and affected by their immediate social and cultural environment in ways that are both profound and, occasionally, obvious. For this reason, I think that any application of any systematic or systematizing interpretive theory will distort the lived messiness that the primary evidence attests to. "Methodology" is no less distorting to historical reconstruction than is theology (or, in Badiou's case, atheology). Origen's Paul tells us not about Paul but about Origen; Augustine's Paul, about Augustine. Thus, to respond finally to Badiou's characterization of Paul posed in his first chapter heading—Paul: Our Contemporary—I would have to say, Yes. Badiou's Paul is our contemporary. And that is precisely how we know that Badiou, in giving us his fresh reading of the apostle's letters, has presented us not with a study of Paul and his concerns, but with an oblique self-portrait, and an investigation of concerns and ideas that are irreducibly Badiou's.

## Notes

1. See N. deLange, *Origen and the Jews* (Cambridge, 1976).
2. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* vi.8; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 64.3.11–12; see discussion in H. Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 1966), 67f.
3. He felt the lack of the commentaries more acutely and asked Jerome to stop bothering with his biblical translations and to concentrate instead on patristic writings, most especially Origen's; *Ep.* 28.2.2.
4. See J. J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York, 2005), chap. 8, "The Augustinian Putsch in Africa."
5. Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), 159–250.
6. That is, through the argument of his essay on Romans 9 in the *ad Simplicianum*, written in 396, shortly before the *Confessions*. For a review of how he gets to his new position, see P. Fredriksen, "Beyond the Body/Soul Dichotomy," *Recherches augustiniennes* 23 (1988): 87–114.
7. The classic study is W. Kümmel, *Römer 7 und das Bild des Menschen im Neuen Testament* (1929; Munich 1974); see too E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia, 1983). For the way Augustine's later reading affected Romans 7, see P. Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self," *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986): 3–34.
8. I owe this happy phrasing to Professor Andrew Jacobs.
9. K. Stendahl, "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul among the Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia, 1976).
10. For his most programmatic statement of this conviction, *de civitate Dei* 22.4–5; 17, women will be raised in their female bodies; 19, fat people will not be raised in an overweight body; and 20, amputees will have limbs restored.
11. *Religion and Society in the Age of S. Augustine* (London, 1972), 20f.
12. For the way such thinking affects the quest for the historical Jesus, see P. Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (New York, 1999), 261–70.