Reading Romans After Christendom

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the reception of Paul's Letter to the Romans reveals the extent to which this remarkable document has repeatedly been read and interpreted in ways that have transformed individual lives and set in motion movements of reform or mission that have been of great historical significance. The role played by this epistle in the lives of Augustine and Martin Luther are obvious examples of its transformative potential, while more recently, Karl Barth's discovery of it in the early twentieth century set in motion a theological movement which had widespread and profound influence in the context of the modern world. In the preface to the first edition of his commentary on Romans in 1918, Barth said that he had written this work 'with a joyful sense of discovery'.[1] He later enlarged on his personal circumstances at the point at which the discovery of Paul's gospel was made:

> I myself know what it means year in year out to mount the steps of the pulpit, conscious of the responsibility to understand and interpret, and longing to fulfil it; and yet, utterly incapable, because at the University I had never been brought beyond that well known "Awe in the presence of history" which means in the end no more than that all hope of engaging in the dignity of understanding and interpretation had been surrendered.[2]

It could be claimed that the reception history of this letter is the outstanding example of the propensity of biblical texts to burst into new and unanticipated life when read in particular historical and cultural contexts. Periods in which major cultural shifts occur appear be the times in which readers or expositors are offered the possibility of fresh lenses with which to engage with long-familiar biblical texts. This notion of the Bible as containing 'exploding texts' has been helpfully discussed by Walter Brueggemann who distinguishes between the 'scribal' role of securing the text and keeping it available, and the re-discovery of the prophetic significance of the same scriptures in a new situation in which entirely fresh questions may arise. The 'scribes' guard the text which had its origin

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1 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 1.

2 Ibid., p. 9.

in prophetic utterance 'until another prophet comes, who will be grasped by the lingering text, and who becomes the occasion of a fresh textual explosion'.[3]

If this concept of the explosive potential of the biblical texts is accepted it immediately raises a very important question: since the Letter to the Romans has (to mix the metaphor) repeatedly *erupted* with enormous power at different turning points in the history of Christianity across the past two thousand years, *might it be possible that it is about to do so again at the critical juncture in world history at which we discover ourselves today?* If it is valid to suggest that the discovery of the relevance of Romans by Augustine occurred at the dawn of Christendom, and the second associated with Martin Luther took place at the mid-point of that phenomenon, does the collapse of the attempt to create a Christian civilization provide the context for a fresh and transformative reading of Paul's letter?

THE CONTEXT FOR THE RECEPTION OF ROMANS TODAY

I propose that there are at least three major historical developments which, taken together, have created a global situation which threatens an agreed sense of the meaning of human existence, the security and well-being of the human family, and ultimately the continuing existence of the planet on which we exist together. The first of these factors can be identified as *the crisis of the modern Western world*. This has been variously categorized as postmodernity, or late modernity, but either way the terminology suggests a civilization that has lost its moorings and exists in a dangerous cultural, moral and existential vacuum. This crisis of meaning has long been recognised by thoughtful people who, while often themselves having turned away from faith, express concern that the loss of God in technologically powerful societies can only result in ethical confusion and social conflict. Albert Camus expressed the anguish he shared with many of his twentieth century contemporaries at the absurdity of a world without its Creator in memorable passages like the following:

> During the last century, man cast off the fetters of religion. Hardly was he free, however, when he created new and utterly intolerable chains. Virtue dies but is born again, more exacting than ever. […] The sources of life and of creation seem exhausted. Fear paralyses a Europe peopled with phantoms and machines.[4]

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[3] Walter Brueggemann, *Texts That Linger, Words That Explode: Listening to Prophetic Voices* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 18.

[4] Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 243.

That was written in 1951 at a time when many Western intellectuals shared the author's sense of the *absurdity* of life in a godless world. In the seven decades which have passed since that time the pain of the loss of God has been largely forgotten while the historical events which have changed our context – the collapse of Communism, the rise and dominance of a new form of global capitalism, the creation of an interconnected world through the technology of the internet – have left us with what has been described as an 'age of uncertainty'.[5]

The second factor which has shaped the historical situation in which we find ourselves is *the collapse of Christendom*. Sociologists have long debated the nature, causes and consequence of secularisation, but as we are now well into the twenty-first century there can surely be little doubt remaining that we find ourselves in a post-Christian culture in which the images of flourishing congregations and a widespread respect for 'the holy' increasingly fade from our rear view mirrors. What is particularly striking is the depth of the crisis in European Catholicism, given that this tradition has been more heavily invested in the Christendom project than any other. As long ago as 1963 the theologian Karl Rahner could write:

> Let us get away from the tyranny of statistics. For the next hundred years they are always going to be against us, if we ever let them speak out of turn. *One* real conversion in a great city is something more splendid than the spectacle of a whole remote village going to the sacraments.[6]

In a remarkable passage from which, I suggest, Protestants who hanker after a 'revival' which might return us to the world we have lost can learn, Rahner called upon European Catholics to abandon 'the defence of the old facades which have nothing, or very little, behind them'. The time has come to cease maintaining 'the pretence of a universal Christendom', because only by 'letting all this go' can we 'be free for real missionary adventure and apostolic self-confidence'.[7]

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5 See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007). He describes the 1970s as a crucial turning point at which a brave new world emerged consisting of 'erased or punctured boundaries, information deluge, rampant globalization, consumer feasting in the affluent North and a "deepening sense of desperation and exclusion in a large part of the rest of the world" arising from "the spectacle of wealth on the one hand and destitution on the other"' p. 49.

6 Karl Rahner, *The Christian Commitment* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 33.

7 Ibid., pp. 34-35.

The third historical factor which defines our context in the present era, and acts as a counter-balance to the first two, is *the emergence and significance of world Christianity*. The phenomenal growth of Christianity across the Global South had long been noticed by the late Andrew Walls and is now a widely discussed topic both within and beyond Christian academia. This phenomenon has been variously described as the 'next Christendom',[8] or as evidence of a global revival which, it is hoped, might counterbalance Western secularism and trigger the re-evangelization of Europe.[9] Such interpretations fail to recognise the distinctive nature of Christianity beyond the West and so miss its real significance in the context of the era we have described. Lamin Sanneh and Michael McClymond point out that the growth of Christianity in many different cultural and linguistic contexts has resulted from 'the indigenous ferment of mother-tongue engagement in Scripture', and they conclude that this 'post-Western resurgence' demonstrates Christianity's character 'as a world religion that is not tied to Western cultural delineations but thrives in the multiple idioms of the adopted societies'.[10] They add the important observation that the cultures within which this dramatic expansion of Christianity has occurred 'are not the heirs to Western Christendom in its Catholic and Protestant streams despite the legacy of colonial rule'.[11]

Which brings us to the central question with which this discussion is concerned: *does the historical and cultural context which we have briefly described, being a time of massive change and deep uncertainty, create the kind of situation in which Paul's Letter to the Romans might again become an exploding text, with consequences capable of impacting the entire human family?*

READING ROMANS AFTER CHRISTENDOM

The broad lines of interpretation of the Letter to the Romans in the many published commentaries used by teachers and preachers throughout the twentieth century reflected an understanding of the context, purpose and content of the book which emerged during the era when Christendom was

8 See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

9 See Mark Shaw, *Global Awakening: How 20th Century Revivals Triggered a Christian Revolution* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010).

10 'Introduction' to *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to World Christianity*, ed. by Lamin Sanneh and Michael McClymond (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 1-2.

11 Ibid., p. 2.

a major force in the Western world. Questions began to be raised concerning that received tradition when in 1964, Krister Stendahl suggested that,

> the main lines of Pauline interpretation – and hence both conscious and unconscious reading and quoting of Paul by scholars and lay people alike – have for many centuries been out of touch with one of the most basic of the questions and concerns that shaped Paul's thinking in the first place: the relation between Jews and Gentiles.[12]

I do not intend to discuss the lengthy, often heated, debates which followed the publication of Stendahl's lectures, but his fundamental claim that the biblical texts which exploded at the time of the Protestant Reformation did so in relation to the urgent and anguished questions which arose at that particular juncture of history is surely correct. As has been suggested above, such dramatic, prophetic readings of the Bible result in major upheavals and transformations, but they are relatively brief and are followed by the return of the 'scribes' who oversee the routinization of charisma and guard the new tradition which is intended to preserve the gains which have been made.

My question is whether the collapse of Christendom, the cultural crisis of the West, and the dramatic emergence of churches shaped by a wide variety of cultural contexts is creating a situation in which the Letter to the Romans is about to explode once more? Consider the phenomenon of world Christianity and the eruption of faith in a mosaic of cultural contexts. This movement is characterised not only by cultural diversity, but also by the fact that it has emerged very largely among peoples who find themselves at the economic and political margins of a globalised world. In that respect it represents a return to the model of missionary expansion which we discover on the pages of the New Testament where the movement described in the book of Acts is *from* the margins of occupied Galilee *to* the imperial capital of Rome.

Lamin Sanneh has said that if we are to understand the changing face of Christianity today, 'we must forget our modern rationalism, our proud confidence in reason and science, our restless search for wealth and power', and enter sympathetically into the mood of the new Christians who 'are standing between the shipwreck of the old order and the tarnished fruits of self-rule of the new, finding all the dreams of a worldly utopia shattered by betrayal, war, vanity, anarchy, poverty, epidemics, and endemic hostility'. It is in such contexts that poor people living in depop-

[12] Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 1.

ulated villages or burgeoning slums are 'flocking to the churches because the old fences of what used to be home have crumbled'.[13]

The question we must ask concerns the ways in which Paul's Letter to the Romans is being read in such contexts? Elsa Tamez provides one example from the favelas of Latin America where, she says, 'Paul's message of the justice of God realized in justification by faith shines like a ray of the dawn's light pushing back the darkness'.[14] However, Tamez observes that this doctrine was brought to South America by Protestant missionaries whose formulation of it had arisen 'in a social and political context different to ours'. The message too often reached the suffering peoples of South America 'in a garbled form' and the breadth and glory of Paul's gospel was lost when justification by faith was merely repeated like a mantra with no recognition of its true content within the text of Scripture.

> What does justification say to the poor indigenous peoples of Peru, Guatemala, Bolivia, or Mexico, who suffer both hunger and permanent discrimination? It is shameful to bring them the message that God has justified the sinner with no contextual specificity, or with nothing to distinguish the faces of sinners. If we accept that sin has to do with social reality, justification also has to be understood within the same horizon.[15]

It is not possible within the limits of this essay to cite multiple Christian witnesses from the non-Western world, but the fact is that a growing chorus of voices like that of Elsa Tamez are to be heard across the globe, pleading that the Bible be read, interpreted and heard in relation to the concrete realities of globalisation and its impact on the majority of believers within the worldwide Body of Christ.

I want to cite a witness from Asia who underlines the urgency of such pleas addressed to fellow believers and identifies an additional aspect of the context beyond the Western world. Michael Nai-Chui Poon points out that Asia's geological configuration is different from that of the trans-Atlantic world, in that it rests 'on two stable continental platforms, and

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13 Lamin Sanneh, in *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World*, ed. by Lamin Sanney and Joel A. Carpenter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 222-23. He concludes: 'They are inspired and comforted by the narratives of ancient scripture, throwing themselves on the mercy and goodness of God and upon one another's charity. […] The dramatic response of compressed, pre-industrial societies of the non-Western world to Christianity has opened a new chapter in the annals of religion'.

14 Elsa Tamez, *Amnesty of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 1.

15 Ibid., p. 21.

two major arcs of volcanic instability that stretch from Indonesia to the Philippines islands'. This geographical and geological context creates an environment marked by vulnerability, volatility and fragility as central features of Asian life.

> To the present day, migrant workers, refugees of war and stateless people testify to the fragile and fluid conditions in human life that are punctuated by eruptions of wars, tsunamis and earthquakes. Makeshift tents replace cathedrals as carriers of Christianity at the start of the third millennium. Peoples are on the move; and so too faith is on the move.[16]

The writer concludes that ecumenical experiences in the Pacific Rim suggest that this region of the world 'opens up spiritual horizons and awakens moral tasks *that Christendom experiences cannot reveal*'. He adds that if globalisation has created the need for a world church to discover a new theological grammar, syntax and semantics for today's world, 'the Pacific Rim may well be a fruitful area for this theological work.'[17]

ROMANS IN THE POST-CHRISTENDOM WEST

The developments in world Christianity to which we have referred above, important as they unquestionably are, do not stand alone but are contemporaneous with fresh readings of the Pauline literature emerging within the post-Christendom West. The massive shifts which have taken place in the culture of Europe and North America as the result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, leading to claims concerning 'the end of history' and the triumph of unfettered capitalism, have led biblical scholars to reflect on the analogies between this particular situation and the imperial context of the ancient world within which Paul's letters were written. Theodore von Laue, a pioneer of the sub-discipline of world history, concluded

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16 Michael Nai-Chui Poon, 'The Rise of Asian Pacific Christianity and Challenges to the Church Universal' in *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century: A Reader for Theological Education*, ed. by Melisande Lorke and Dietrich Werner (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013), p. 69.

17 Ibid., p. 70. Italics added. A key statement in relation to this discussion is the article on 'Theological Method' by T.D. Gener and L. Bautista in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by William Dyrness and Veli-Matti Karkkainen (Nottingham: IVP, 2008), pp. 889-94. They conclude: 'Times have changed. With the collapse of Euro-American (Western) dominance in Christian theology, there is an increased recognition of a polycentric world and a polycentric world Christianity, with emphasis on many theological centres' (p. 890). There is a second article under this heading on pp. 889-98 by Kevin Vanhoozer which is also very important.

that the historical phase of Western domination had run its course, creating 'an interdependent world supporting five and more billions of human lives, a large percentage existing in comparative misery'. He concluded that the prospects for the future appeared to be grim, not least because 'the West has spent its spiritual capital' and the Judeo-Christian spiritual restraints in individual and collective life had 'ceased to be a public force within the West itself'. Von Laue concluded that it was no surprise that people reared in the Western tradition 'have compared this age with the Roman Empire at its decline, undermined by decadence within and threatened by barbarians without'.[18]

That historical quest for analogies between the imperial age of Roman domination in the Mediterranean world and the emergence of globalisation today is paralleled by the discovery on the part of biblical scholars of analogies between modern Christianity's experience of 'exile' in an age governed by a false ideology, and the context of the primitive church in relation to imperial Rome. It is not possible here to survey the growing body of literature reflecting this move in detail but I note four themes characteristic of post-Christendom readings of the Letter to the Romans.

First, a great deal of attention has been paid to *the urban context of the city of Rome and to Paul's understanding of the specific challenges this presented to the Jesus community*. The address of the letter, 'To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints' (Rom. 1:7), immediately draws attention to the specific geographical, social and religious character of the situation within which the Roman *ecclesia* existed. And yet, as James Harrison has observed, the vast majority of commentaries on this letter 'have shown little interest in the material, documentary, and visual aspects of the city of Rome', thus overlooking the important fact that Paul addresses 'the pastoral, social and political issues that Roman believers faced in Neronian Rome'.[19] The crucial importance of this theme concerns not only the understanding of the original context of the letter, but the application of its message once the interpreter comes to relate the text to the 'second horizon' of the contemporary world which is witnessing urbanisation on a scale never before seen in human history. As Harrison says,

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[18] Theodore von Laue, *The World Revolution of Westernization: The Twentieth Century in Global Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 362.

[19] James R. Harrison, *Reading Romans with Roman Eyes: Studies on the Social Perspective of Paul* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020), p. 3. This volume is the latest, and possibly the most significant, contribution to a post-Christendom reading of Romans. A somewhat less demanding, yet very stimulating entry into this literature is Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (London: SPCK, 2009).

> An interpretation based on painstaking analysis of the available historical evidence and its intersection, exegetically and theologically with Romans, has hopefully a better chance of being correct than an abstract analysis with no anchor in the complex world of mid-50s Rome. […] To ignore the Neronian context of Romans runs the risk that the social and political dimensions of Paul's theology will be overlooked and, consequently, the complexity of Paul's theology is thereby diminished.[20]

Notice that Harrison includes the *visual* dimension of the Roman imperial world as a key aspect of the urban environment within which the house and tenement churches of Rome bore their testimony to the crucified Messiah. That Paul's letters were written and heard in an oral culture in which messages were largely communicated either by oral performance or by visual means has gone largely unnoticed in the highly literate culture of the Western world. The 'gospel' of the *Pax Romana* was promoted in imagery which saturated the cities of the Empire; architecture, statues, monuments, public inscriptions, images on coins, and the very design of the cities themselves, all placarded the ideology of the Caesars and their claims to be the agents of the salvation of the world. Within this urban environment the denizens of Rome 'would have engaged with Paul's epistle to the house and tenement churches of the city, either being confronted with its startlingly new message or being persuaded to adopt its costly implications despite the consequences'.[21]

The *second* theme found in post-Christendom readings of Romans concerns *the missiological character of the letter and its relationship to Paul's burning ambition to reach the western limits of the empire in order to preach Christ to the Spaniards who had yet to hear his name*. Although explicit mention of the planned mission to Spain does not appear in Paul's letter until the penultimate chapter, the hope then expressed, that the believers in the megacity at the heart of the Empire would 'assist me on my journey there' (Rom. 15:24), can be read as the culminating point toward which the entire epistle has been moving. In his monumental commentary on this letter Robert Jewett demonstrates both the importance of reaching Spain within Paul's broad, universal vision of what the Gospel would achieve, and the very considerable difficulties to be overcome if he was to gain access to the furthest Western limits of the Empire. Paul

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20 Harrison, *Reading Romans*, p. 3.

21 Ibid, 25. See Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Re-imagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) and especially Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) for brilliant discussions of the visual nature of Roman urban culture.

needed to introduce his theology of mission in order to dispel misunderstandings concerning his motives and 'to encourage the Roman congregations to overcome their imperialistic behaviour toward one another, because it discredited the impartial righteousness of God'.[22]

Once again, the historical and cultural context of our times enables us to read this letter, not as an abstract theological treatise, but as the expression of a transformative vision of the Christian mission which has enormous relevance with regard to the unprecedented opportunities for the witness of world Christianity in this 'age of uncertainty'. As Jewett expresses it:

> There are many indications that the Letter to the Romans was designed to prepare the ground for the complicated project of the Spanish mission, including the insistence that the impartial righteousness of God does not discriminate against "barbarians" such as the Spaniards, that all claims of cultural superiority are false, that imperial propaganda must be recognised as bogus, and that the domineering behaviour of congregations toward one another must be overcome if the missional hope to unify the world in the praise of God is to be fulfilled.[23]

The *third* theme to which I wish to draw attention concerns *the economics of the kingdom of God*. In the same discussion of the mission to Spain to which reference has just been made the apostle, having indicated the crucial importance of the Spanish mission, surprises his hearers with the news that he must first retrace his steps and return to Jerusalem. Having just spelt out the missional priority of the Western edge of the Empire, he announces an imminent return to the East, despite previously claiming that his work there had been completed! Why this dangerous journey to the heart of his Jewish community which was even then experiencing severe economic distress and deepening religious crisis? The purpose was related to the project of 'the collection' which had been a fundamental aspect of Paul's ministry since the day he had met with James, Peter and John in Jerusalem and vowed 'to remember the poor' in Palestine (Gal. 2: 9-10).

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[22] Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary,* Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 88. If, as being argued here, Romans is fundamentally missiological it is not surprising that it has had significant influence on the modern missionary movement. See Andrew F. Walls, 'Romans One and the Modern Missionary Movement' in his *The Modern Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), pp. 55-67.

[23] Jewett, *Romans,* p. 79.

Here again is a dimension of this letter often ignored, or regarded as a marginal detail when, in fact, it expresses a crucial aspect of Paul's understanding of the Gospel and of the praxis which flows from it. The economic structure of the ancient world can be represented as a pyramid in which obscene amounts of wealth were funnelled up to a small minority at the top, while vast numbers of landless people, migrants who poured into the cities, and a vast army of slaves, survived above or below subsistence. At the lowest level were the 'absolutely poor', living in rags and without shelter or sustenance. The project of the 'collection' was a concrete expression of solidarity within the Body of Christ, a visible sign of the reconciling power of the Gospel, and the evidence before a watching world that the kingdom of God was indeed breaking into the darkness and injustice of the world. Dieter Georgi says that Paul's Gentile converts had realized that 'by accepting the meaning of the preaching of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, they had been led toward and integrated within a unique, worldwide community: the people of God of the new creation'.[24]

Here, surely, is a further example of the manner in which the lenses provided for us in a post-Christendom era enable us to see what has frequently been treated as a marginal text as having enormous significance at a time when globalisation is creating social and economic injustices which both mirror and exceed the divisions of the ancient world. Paul's collection of funds for the poor in Jerusalem challenged the Hellenistic concept of 'an economy geared toward growth of production and profit' and, drawing upon the covenantal ethics of the Hebrew Bible and the example of Jesus, attempted, like the church described in Acts 2, to model a common wealth.

> Increase of wealth for him needs to be common wealth. The money collected for Jerusalem grows also, but into a universal divine worship. The money involved becomes a social force, a gift from community to community. […] In this process the subjugation of the universe under the Rich One who became poor has begun, and the unification of humanity has been initiated.[25]

The *fourth and final* example concerns what I will call *the ecological reach of the Gospel and the hope of the healing of the created world*. I refer of course to the wonderful passage in Romans 8 in which the whole of creation is depicted as waiting 'in eager expectation' for the consummation of redemption in which it will share! The picture of the created world 'groaning' like a woman 'in the pains of childbirth' is extraordinary and

[24] Dieter Georgi, *Remembering the Poor: The History of Paul's Collection for Jerusalem* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 117.

[25] Ibid., p. 153.

finds tragic illustration in the multiple images of the rape and burning of the planet in the contemporary world.

I return here to James Harrison's remarkable book which contains a chapter relating this text in Romans to the understanding of nature in the Julio-Claudian period. He notes that there were large-scale pleasure parks in imperial Rome, which were kept in private ownership for the use of an elite. Following the infamous fire of Rome in 64 CE, Nero created a garden that outstripped all the others and Harrison asks how the emergence of the Roman construct of nature would have 'been perceived by believers after they had been confronted for the first time by Paul's conception of the "groaning creation"' (Rom. 8:18-25)? It is impossible to capture the richness of this discussion here, but I quote a passage which summarises Harrison's conclusion. He suggests that Romans 8:18-25 was the 'first salvo' in a debate about nature that extended into the second century and that, implicit in this famous passage is a searching critique of imperial Roman views of nature.

> Paul's "second Adam" theology and concomitantly, our conformity to Christ, the image of God, open new vistas for understanding our ecological stewardship of the groaning planet, including the abandonment of late capitalism's addiction to greed and the relentless consumption of increasingly scarce resources.[26]

CONCLUSION

My personal response to the question posed at the beginning of this essay – whether we might be witnessing the Letter to the Romans bursting into new life as an 'exploding text' once again – is to affirm a positive reply on the basis of the evidence which I have attempted to outline. However, such explosions do not happen when fresh and transformative expositions of long familiar texts are presented at the scholarly level in books that, however brilliant, will be read only by an intellectual elite. What is needed is the transfer of such knowledge to Christian teachers, leaders, preachers and – dare I say it – worship leaders! When that happens the latest, and perhaps the greatest, textual explosion could both renew and unite the worldwide Body of Christ and halt the march of our globalised world toward the ultimate catastrophe. I end as I began with a quotation from Walter Brueggemann who nicely sums up the action required for the Letter to the Romans to burst into fresh life yet again:

[26] Harrison, *Reading Romans*, p. 224.

The rehearing and respeaking of prophetic texts with fresh contemporaneity does not depend primarily upon critical and technical interpretative matters, but upon a capacity for imagination and intuition, coupled with courage, which dares to assert that these texts, concretely located and specifically addressed, can now and must be concretely relocated and readdressed as illuminating and revelatory in contemporary contexts.[27]

[27] Walter Brueggemann, *Texts That Linger*, p. 18.