

## **New Fruit from a Familiar Olive Tree? Problems and Prospects for Post-Shoah Appeals to *New Insights* from Romans 11**

©Mark D. Nanos, PhD (Nov. 2, 2020; English version revised for marknanos.com website on 6-29-2021)

This is the English version of my conference paper, which is being translated into German by Carla Weitensteiner und Hermut Löhr for publication in the conf. vol., forthcoming 2021: *40 Jahre Rheinischer Synodalbeschluss 'Zur Erneuerung des Verhältnisses von Christen und Juden = 40 years After the Synod of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland Decision 'To renew the relationship between Christians and Jews'*

### **Abstract:**

The Synod appealed to phrases and ideas in Romans 11—explicitly citing v. 18b in Paul's olive tree allegory—to repudiate the traditional Christian dismissal of the Jewish people as the people of God replaced by "the Church," and to affirm instead their eternal relationship. However, today's translations and interpretations of this allegorical text and those throughout chapters 9–11 still undermine the Synod's declarations: e.g., Jews are presented as “branches broken ‘off’” for “unbelief,” replaced by new branches representing the Christian Gentiles, although Jews could be “grafted in again”—when no longer “hardened,” “enemies,” and “disobedient”—by becoming Christians too. This essay examines some problems that arise from the fact that the traditional (“old”) pre-Shoah translation and interpretive choices remain the familiar ones even though they undermine the Synod's aims, then presents exegetically based additional, newer insights that would help promote them.

### **Essay:**

The 1980 Synod's commission statement opened with a citation from Paul's famous allegory of the olive tree:

*Thou bearest not the root, but the root thee (Rom. 11:18b).*

The 1980 and subsequent 2005 commission statements we are celebrating<sup>1</sup> appealed to additional elements in Rom 11, for example, to argue for the continued covenantal standing of Jews not persuaded about the gospel:

*"We believe the permanent election of the Jewish people as the people of God and realize that through Jesus Christ the church is taken into the covenant of God with his people"*  
(cf. 1980: Thesis IV, 4).

These declarations interpret Paul to uphold that Christians—"the Church," as it is usually phrased—have (has) not replaced Jews, the genealogical descendants of Abraham-Isaac-Jacob/Israel as "Israel." Rather, Christians (more specifically, followers of Christ from the other *ethnē* [peoples, nations, Gentiles, ethnic groups]) have joined *alongside* of and *with* all Jews (i.e., the historical "Israel") as fellow members of the people of God (i.e., "and you, a wild olive shoot, is being grafted among them"; v. 17).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the commissions reasoned that covenantal status as the people of God apart from the Church continued to apply to the Jewish people from Paul's time to its own, reasoning that extends the implications to our time and beyond.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to expressing remorse regarding culpability for the Shoah and detailing other reasons for redressing the Evangelical Churches' traditional concepts of and discourses about Jews and Judaism, the commission appealed to this intriguing warrant:

---

<sup>1</sup> I congratulate you for 40 years of an extremely impressive effort to create a more promising future for Christian-Jewish relations. To be counted among the Jews you call upon to advance this agenda is a very special honor; thank you.

<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, the statement does contain some ambiguity that could be understood to indicate that the Church is now a part of the covenant made with Israel, or in the traditional direction that the Church has become Israel; however, the 2005 clarifications make it unlikely that was their intent. They appear to seek to distance their proposal, explicitly because of the harmful legacy of the traditional readings, from claiming either the replacement of the covenant made with Israel by a new covenant for the Church, or, alternatively, by the appropriation of the covenant made with Israel into a covenant made with the Church as the "new" or "true Israel." If the clarification I have suggested is close to their intentions, that would avoid the zero sum reasoning of the traditional interpretations, which proceed from the premise that only one or the other group can be in a covenant relationship with God. Instead, there are many covenants and covenant renewals throughout the narratives of the Tanakh, and the covenant God makes through Jesus as Messiah is new in the sense of an additional one, not one that replaces any others, and not one that appropriates any others, but one that exists alongside all of the others: "... but regarding election they [i.e., Israelites/Jews, including those who do not share Paul's convictions about Jesus, whom he is discussing the fate of specifically] are beloved on account of the fathers, because the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:28–29).

Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own, many discussed in detail throughout my *Reading Romans within Judaism: The Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos, Vol. 2* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018); see the "Appendix" therein for literal and paraphrased versions of 11:11–12:1a, from which I will draw in this essay.

<sup>3</sup> The 1980 statement in 4.7 makes this explicit.

*"The new biblical insights concerning the continuing significance of the Jewish people within the history of God (e.g. Rom. 9-11)...."*

This essay introduces additional biblical insights that can advance the commissions' welcome aims through new translations and interpretations of the texts in Rom 11, especially from the olive tree allegory, which continues to be a central text for Christian theological reasoning about Jews and Judaism as well as about Christian identity itself. But I want to also highlight a concern: this statement begins from several premises that I think we should address explicitly if we hope that new insights such as those to which the Synod appeals will successfully shape a new future in the directions for which it and we strive. I propose to begin by examining some of the problems, followed by the introduction of several new conceptual prospects—especially for new translations and interpretations that can help the Synod's effort to produce good fruit from an ancient olive tree allegory.

### **Some Problems with Appealing to "New Biblical Insights"**

The appeal to *new biblical insights* upon which to build, as welcome as this is, also implicitly betrays a problem with enlisting such texts to accomplish the task before us. After all, the biblical texts in Rom 11, and the specific language cited in 11:18b, were not newly discovered after the Shoah, unlike were for example the Dead Sea Scrolls. Some 40 years later, that is the case all the more. These texts have been encountered every time Romans—a regular part of the liturgical readings, a widely consulted epistle, and one for which many commentaries have been written—has been read. Furthermore, an even more positive text in Rom 11 was featured already twenty-five years earlier in the Vatican II statements in *Nostra Aetate* 4, upon which the commission was building also: "because they are beloved for the sake of the patriarchs, for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (from 11:28–29).<sup>4</sup> Also often cited with new frequency in recent years for these kinds of statements is a phrase in v. 26: "all Israel will be saved."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> *NA* 4 reads: "the Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made."

<sup>5</sup> There is not space to discuss the alternative I suggest, "kept safe ['safed']" or "protected," and the additional opportunities that translation presents for advancing promising alternatives; they are discussed in the essays in my *Reading Romans within Judaism*; idem, "Paul: Why Bother? A Jewish Perspective," *Swedish Theological Quarterly* (*STK*) 95, no. 4 (2019): 271–87, <https://journals.lub.lu.se/STK/article/view/20452>; and idem, "'All Israel Will Be Saved' or 'Kept Safe'? (Rom 11:26): Israel's Conversion or Irrevocable Calling to Gospel the Nations?" In *Israel and*

To declare these *insights* to be new implicitly admits that messages in these "old" texts—and, for example, the idea that the Jewish people had "continuing significance" for Paul apart from representing evangelistic targets or as instruments in eschatological schemes—have heretofore been ignored, discounted, and intentionally or not, deeply undermined in Christian traditions. Moreover, the idea that what is being proposed rests upon insights that are *new* can also be used—especially by those whose greater concern is the preservation of traditional interpretations—to undermine the need to consider them seriously, even to bother to engage them, because the traditionally familiar interpretations are often implicitly assumed when not explicitly declared to represent the oldest, most faithful interpretations of Paul's texts. Furthermore, the *motives* for seeking to find or privilege new insights in the directions the Synod highlighted have been regularly attacked to discredit them as merely expressions of contemporary sensibilities, not proper exegetical rigor. However, all interpretations reflect different sensibilities. The question is not which insights or readings are objective but which sensibilities motivate each reading and which ones we, as readers, decide should be the sensibilities that best represent our own.

This set of constraints gives rise to several questions to consider carefully if we hope to alter traditional negative Christian ways of conceptualizing, discussing, and behaving toward Jews and Judaism, not least where Paul's voice arises—based on an appeal to them. Why have the proposed, more respectful implications from Paul's texts not been highlighted previously? What other forces shaped the legacy interpretations, and why have they persisted post-Shoah? What must we do differently to help ensure that these *new, unfamiliar* ways to read Paul become the *old, familiar* ways in the future?

Let us begin with the problematic premise that, for many, what is *new* is to be trusted less than what is *familiar*.

Arguments that the traditional is to be regarded as more trustworthy than alternatives newly offered often appeal to the fact that *traditional* translations and interpretations have been repeated for hundreds or even thousands of years; they have shaped the culture in which they make sense to traditional interpreters, and vice versa. Here is the rub: exegesis is supposed to

---

*the Nations: Paul's Gospel in the Context of Jewish Expectation*, edited by František Ábel (Lanham, et al: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021), 243–69.

privilege the most probable *original* (= *oldest*) meaning, regardless of whether it is older and more familiar or newly offered.

In fact, the familiar traditional views are at a disadvantage, exegetically speaking, although this does not seem to be widely recognized. Why? Because the interpreters who shaped the traditional views now familiar, thus regarded to be self-evidently superior to something only recently presented, were not beholden to the much more recent developments in historiographical practices. Rather, they were engaged in reading directly from the texts to address their own *newer* but nevertheless *later* contemporary concerns from their own sensibilities, yet approached as if their concerns and sensibilities were by definition the same as those of the original authors, *mutates mutandis*. For example, Luther attributed Catholic practices he opposed to Jews of Paul's time (e.g., conflating indulgences which he regarded as works-righteousness with Paul's opposition to *erga nomou*)<sup>6</sup>—who had no such practices—because, of course, there were no Catholics mentioned in Paul's texts. He depended upon his audiences sharing his sensibilities and thus buying into these conflations; ironically, the same anachronistic conflations still govern the "familiar" ways of framing research questions and discourses about Jews and Judaism in Pauline studies to this day. They are traditional, to be sure, but are they authentic, helpful for anyone beholden to approaching the text today according to best historiographical practices, or the most responsible basis for adjudicating between exegetical alternatives?

The problem for the traditional dismissive premise is rather simple to identify and answer, on historiographical grounds: regardless of familiarity, exegesis should privilege whichever interpretation *now* on offer can best demonstrate *the highest degree of probability for interpreting of the original text in its context*—regardless of whether that interpretation appears

---

<sup>6</sup> In my view the traditional translation "works of the law" is also similarly influenced by premises that misunderstand what Paul was opposing in his own context, in which the phrase should be translated "rites of a custom [of proselyte conversion, completed by circumcision of adult males]" instead. That had nothing to do with the idea of Jews or anyone else practicing Torah deeds/works (which Luther's view as well as those that now oppose his view both assume), including circumcision of their infant sons. The issue was that circumcision was a rite not prescribed for adult male non-Jews in Torah by which to become Jews, so Paul was upholding written Torah in his argument about what faithfulness for the Christ-following non-Jews entailed. Therefore the usual way of differentiating even the traditional Lutheran conflation from the original context for Paul starts from a mistaken understanding of the binary around which Paul's argument turned, which was not faith versus deeds but faithfulness for a Christ-following non-Jew apart from versus including also the undertaking of proselyte conversion; see my forthcoming essay in *Reading Galatians within Judaism: The Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos, Vol. 3* (Eugene: Cascade, 2021).

to be *new* or *traditional*—before using one's interpretation thereof to address the interpreter's own; otherwise, the conclusions, however familiar, are by definition anachronistic.

For those who respect the practice of historical exegesis and its role regardless of what previous interpretive traditions made familiar, the most probable interpretation of the original meaning (i.e., the best exegetically based case) should become thereafter the familiar one for declaring what the author meant, not least for literal-oriented translations. That should be the case even if it might not be what we wish he (or she) meant, even if we choose to express disagreement with that viewpoint or to advance a different one as better, for example, as morally more compelling for our own time. Only when we make every effort to respect the author's probable meaning, and to distinguish that from what we want to use it to mean, can we claim that our translations and interpretations are exegetical rather than merely confessional. That does not mean that the results of exegesis cannot correspond to our hermeneutical aims, such as the Synod claimed when appealing to Rom 11 for new biblical insights by which to advance a more respectful relationship with Jews and Judaism—but we must remain just as suspicious of our biases as we are of those with whom we disagree.

This clarification is especially important to make if one is to appeal to that which is *newly advanced* when challenging the familiar. Those who object to new insights in the direction to which the Synod appealed often imply if not state that such new insights are especially suspect because they represent contemporary, such as post-Shoah revisionist, ideologically driven agendas rather than proper exegesis. Such accusations presuppose the interpreter's own interpretations are instead exegetically rigorous and disinterested, even though conforming to and in defense of traditional or traditionally shaped interpretations.<sup>7</sup> After encountering new

---

<sup>7</sup> For an exemplary case of such reasoning in contemporary scholarship, see N. T Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (COQG 4; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), esp. 2.1412–15, which includes this pronouncement to discredit new views that challenge his own (explicitly aimed at interpreters such as myself): "We have looked at those centuries themselves not only through the tearful misted-up spectacles of post-Holocaust western thinkers, but through the distorting lenses of post-Enlightenment historians of something called 'religion'" (2.1413). Wright, who represents the Anglican Church as a Bishop, apparently does not consider himself living after or to be in any way shaped by the Holocaust or Enlightenment or western thinking, or to be addressing matters of religion, and presumably also to be without empathy of the kind to which those interpreters admit as a warrant to reconsider what Paul might have meant or how what we decide he meant should be qualified with respect to how to best think and behave in our times in view of the historical damage to which the traditional proclamations have contributed; thus he and his exegesis can be trusted. Wright's polemic presumes that his ideal reader shares his ideological spectacles rather than those he dismisses for being concerned about the impact of theological pronouncements in the name of Paul—to indulge in his imagery, that they are to (naively?) suppose, with him, that they see the world and interpret Paul's texts through their own purely objective, disinterested (although "confessionally affiliated," unlike many of those he disparages as biased), non-empathetic, exegetically trustworthy because straight from God-since-birth-thus-

alternatives for interpretation that offer more promising and respectful ways to think and discuss and behave (e.g., with respect to Jews and Judaism), is it actually an act of indifference and commitment to exegetical rigor to proceed to present the traditional views (e.g., that confine Jews and Judaism to being [mis]understood according to polemics from two thousand years ago) without advising the interpreter's audiences that there are alternative interpretations they might want to consider for understanding Paul and how his voice might best apply to their own concerns today?

Although it should go without saying that the received views are no less interested and thus suspect for bias—whether or not based on the same moral and justice concerns, or the same bases for measuring best historiographical practices, or based on prior and often institutionally affiliated confessional commitments—those who dismiss new exegetical proposals as untrustworthy seldom signal such recognition about their own, albeit different interests, as well as their own different sensibilities about the implications. As the previous footnote demonstrates, some interpreters deny having any interests themselves, claiming that their interpretations are entirely objective and thus to be trusted, unlike those with which they disagree. Perhaps some interpreters were introduced to interpretations which were immediately and self-evidently understood to be objectively "correct," and thus do not understand that interpretations they hold dear and seek to defend, albeit traditional, were and are by definition no less shaped by the cultural sensibilities of those who developed those interpretations.

The simple fact is that the contemporary reader's sensibilities do not seamlessly express the original self- and group-interests and aims of Paul and his addressees in their mid-first century contexts, but those of later interpreters appealing to those earlier texts in their own later cultural contexts, even if they now express the viewpoint defended by the contemporary interpreters for their own contemporary reasons. The same is true for those who introduce new insights, all the more to the degree that they too might not be beholden to appropriate historical suspicion as a part of the evaluative process of interpretation, which at least offers the chance to arrive at and privilege conclusions that may or may not be those the interpreter prefers, either for

---

without-need-of-spectacles eyes. But does not Wright seek to map out for his ideal reader how to live in an authentic Christian (and thus religious) way in a post-Enlightenment post-Holocaust western world based upon the way that he interprets Paul (and Jesus, et al)—albeit a way that he differentiates from those offered by other interpreters?

the original texts and people, or for how they can be applied to the interpreter's own interests today.

When the defenders of the familiar fail to engage the new arguments made for interpretations being advanced on their own terms, they betray that their ideologically based values take precedent over best historiographical practices. Such commitments are evident when new insights are summarily dismissed with informal fallacies (e.g., by exaggerated misrepresentations, appeal to middle ground, the consensus, begging the question, slippery slope, and ad hominem), supposedly discredited by simple repetition of the familiar.<sup>8</sup>

Such approaches to discrediting new biblical insights, however, not only involve the fallacious inference that the traditional views are by definition less beholden to ideological intentions, but also betray the questionable substitution of repetition of the familiar for rigorous interrogation of the sources in dispute; in fact, the former more likely inhibits comprehensive examination: if the matter is presumed to be settled, no similar effort is presumably required. The objection is in effect to being challenged to reconsider biblical insights by interpreters not beholden to the same traditionally derived (old and familiar) insights as themselves, from which they have been able to proceed without being required to justify them, or even to bother to identify the premises upon which they depend. We might suspect this dynamic when encountering informal fallacy appeals to the ideal reader that "no one has been persuaded," or "I am not convinced" and the like, all the more when not accompanied by the proper engagement of (not to mention explaining of) the new interpretive arguments at issue on their own terms, which, being new, might not be well enough known yet to validate such judgments, and, most importantly, would have had already to persuade others who likely share the same ideological biases and thus who are just as likely to dismiss the new interpretation on offer a priori, and by way of similar tactics. To borrow from Wittgenstein, the river runs where it has "always" run. The interpreters who represent the familiar, and those who share their traditional confessional allegiances can be trusted to adjust a few rocks around which some water might now be directed to flow in new ways, ways that will not pose significant threats to the status quo. But any interpreter who, or interpretation that would seek to alter the course of the riverbed itself cannot be trusted.

---

<sup>8</sup> Again, see the example of Wright's approach in the pages noted above, throughout the chapter in which those examples appear, and *passim*.



Since exegesis is by definition supposed to represent the most probable historical meaning of the texts in their original contexts, the bases for evaluating exegetical claims should be based upon best historiographical practices. It is not acceptable to claim to perpetuate the original meaning of texts when those interpretations were—after all, as already briefly noted—originally developed and enlisted *after* Paul in order to inform and justify the ideological concerns of "later" interpreters, including those who make such claims today. It follows that everyone who claims that their interpretations are based upon exegesis must reckon with the historical fact that all interpretations are by definition interested. The alternative is to admit that they are solely confessional, and therefore, by historical definition anachronistic—since later confessional contexts are not precisely the same as the original ones, and thus claims to historical continuity must be demonstrated on cross-cultural grounds. To be clear, confessional interpretation, or what has come to be known as theological interpretation, can be a legitimate endeavor, but it must be done with the understanding that it does not articulate the meaning of the first audience or author but reflects the concerns of readers and traditions that emerge centuries later. Furthermore, even when contemporary exegetes seek to guard interpretive legacies by appeals to the familiar as if self-evidently superior, and even if some of their views were to be proven historically probable on any given matter, interpretations are interpretations—and interpretations should always be subject to interrogation on both historical exegetical and contemporary hermeneutical grounds. These are the terms that apply to new biblical insights too! We must support new investigations of the evidence, whether undertaken to address new situations or because of new sensibilities or as the result of new insights derived for other reasons based upon best historical and ethical good will practices.

Consider too why the Synod's basis for appealing to these ancient texts was qualified as *new insights*. The primary reason is almost certainly that familiar (old, traditional) Christian discourses on the topics of Jews and Judaism did not highlight these texts. The traditional commentary discourses about Jews and Judaism reflected the discourses that characterized the interpreter's cultures, cultures in which the good will goals articulated by these commissions were not familiar.<sup>9</sup> In the exceptional cases when these specific texts were noted—which of

---

<sup>9</sup> Obviously, there are many other cultural and historical dynamics and specific theological and biblical studies developments that should be discussed here if there was space, since these shaped a cultural world in which the Shoah could and did take place and anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish as well as many other prejudices can still persist and lead to harmful actions.

course some interpreters did, and commentaries could hardly ignore entirely—the impact was implicitly muted when not explicitly subverted by the way the rest of the discourse in which these texts were embedded was translated and interpreted.<sup>10</sup> Those results were emblematic of their very different goals. This interpretive dynamic is foundational; we must understand it, and we must engage it directly in proposals to read Paul in new, more historically and morally responsible ways with respect to the "other," which our decisions will impact too.

The tools of historical enquiry today are different than they were for most of Christian interpretive history, and those include the recent recognition that the texts we investigate were rhetorical, and thus provide prescriptive rather than descriptive data, which must be interrogated in order to be used descriptively. The implications are many.

The traditional interpretations of Paul's texts were developed by Christians concerned about constructing perspectives by which Christians could think about themselves vis-à-vis the topics of Jews and Judaism. Comparisons and contrasts were developed primarily to enhance their self- and group-esteem; the theological foils they constructed were used to define their Christian and Church binary opposite "others."<sup>11</sup> For example, Christians and Christian groups with which they disagreed were disparaged for "Judaizing," even if the issues had nothing to do with Jews or Judaism. Christian interpreters did not often engage with or show intellectual or good will concern for actual Jews and the actual practices of Judaism, and they did not often interact with either in real life. Moreover, what they attributed to Jews and Judaism was often based largely on deductions made from other Pauline texts and the rest of the New Testament and the pronouncements of later Christian interpreters, often especially highlighting one-sided polemical accusations as if providing objective factual information, which implies that the

---

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, when not ignored, they have been and still are often subverted. For example, "saved" is conceived in terms of evangelical conversion to Christianity. Trust by genealogical descendants in the promises made to the fathers is decried as trusting in ethnicity rather than faith, even though Paul affirms that bases explicitly in the argument made in vv. 28–29, where also Paul's assertion that they remain "beloved" is undermined by the insertion of "enemies of God" in the RSV and NRSV, although that phrase appears in no extant manuscripts. For the history of neglecting and subverting the plain sense of vv. 28–29, see Joseph Sievers, "'God's Gifts and Call Are Irrevocable': The Reception of Romans 11:29 through the Centuries and Christian-Jewish Relations," in *Reading Israel in Romans: Legitimacy and Plausibility of Divergent Interpretations*, edited by Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte (Romans through History and Culture Series; Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000), 127–73; for v. 26, see my "'All Israel Will Be Saved' or 'Kept Safe'? (Rom 11:26)."

<sup>11</sup> See David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013), for a comprehensive analysis of this dynamic. Unfortunately, Nirenberg's understanding of Paul is shaped by the traditional interpretations of his texts (although he discusses some newer ideas of which he was aware), but that is also instructive, demonstrating the warrant for the critique of the traditionally shaped construction of Paul on matters of Jews and Judaism that I seek to offer in my work, including in this essay.

accused parties would have agreed to the charges without rejoinder, although that is a highly unlikely supposition when one stops to consider what the "other" most likely thought and championed as ideas on their own more likely terms.<sup>12</sup> They occasionally mined certain rabbinic texts to justify their foils, highlighting a few statements deemed damning. But they read them anachronistically, without regard for their Jewish communal contexts. Those rhetorical contexts were shaped by hundreds of years of suffering already at the hands of Christian interpreters' harmful pronouncements and practices—from outlandish accusations, forced conversions, theft of property, physical harm, exile, to murder—which often appealed to the tradition of "othering" Jews and Judaism by invoking Paul's voice.<sup>13</sup> The polemical language they were able to dig up represented rhetoric developed to sooth and vent among themselves in their powerless circumstances, not discourses directed to Christians, and, interestingly, almost never referring to Paul or his texts.<sup>14</sup>

The commissions' direct concern about the implications that Christian theological reasoning has for real Jews and Judaism thus represents a departure from the normative, traditional Christian patterns. But in view of the kinds of obstacles just discussed, appealing to a few verses from Romans 11—as enormously welcome as that is—can serve only as a first step in a broader transformation of the interpretive enterprise that is required if we wish to sufficiently alter the historical waves of harm, or to successfully combat the internally self-validating interpretive forces they carry forward. To this day those currents advance translations that ostensible represent the plain meaning of the text, which demonstrates the inexorable power of

---

<sup>12</sup> In traditional Christian discourses about the Pharisees, little awareness is expressed about the implicit presupposition at work; namely, that Pharisees would have agreed to these charges of hypocrisy as an ideal to be celebrated. Interpretations proceed as though these polemics constituted objective portrayals to be repeated without contextual qualification. They fail to explain why the Gospel writers would choose these polemical approaches if they did not expect their audiences (albeit years after Jesus) to suppose that such charges would have shamed the Pharisees according to values to which Pharisees subscribed, like humility and care for the needy. Otherwise, the Pharisees (and whoever the Gospel writer's audiences compared them to in their contexts) would be expected to have dismissed them as irrelevant. Furthermore, current interpretations do not seem to consider that the same accusations could be returned toward Jesus and his followers e.g., for public displays of healing and feeding and praying rather than only doing so in private, even for not healing and feeding everyone if having the capabilities to do so. Rhetoric is rhetorical; deductions from polemic must be carefully drawn.

<sup>13</sup> To name but one emblematic example, see Kenneth Stow, *Jewish Dogs: An Image and Its Interpreters: Continuity in the Catholic-Jewish Encounter* (Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); I discuss examples from the Pauline interpretive tradition for Phil 3:2 in, "Paul's Reversal of Jews Calling Gentiles 'Dogs' (Philippians 3:2): 1600 Years of an Ideological Tale Wagging an Exegetical Dog?," in *Reading Corinthians and Philippians within Judaism: The Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos, Vol. 4* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 111–41; updated from the original in *BibInt* 17 (2009): 448–82.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel R. Langton, "The Myth of the 'Traditional View of Paul' and the Role of the Apostle in Modern Jewish-Christian Polemics," *JSNT* 28.1 (2005): 69–104.

the conservative impulse to preserve the familiar. For example, commentaries tend to repeat the familiar as if self-evidently representing the only alternatives worth serious consideration. This habit is perpetuated also in the privileging of manuscript variants that tend to express negative impressions about Jews and Judaism, especially as the "other" from the ostensible perspective of the authors of NT texts, because that was the perspective of later Christian scribes and translators who created these (new) "interpretations."<sup>15</sup> The same concatenating dynamics can be traced in the popular theological lexicons upon which contemporary translators depend.<sup>16</sup> It follows that the materials developed to help pastors construct their homilies and publishing houses develop their Sunday School and other curriculum materials will perpetuate the familiar, largely unaware that many features have been contested in ways that might even lead to welcome opportunities to present new ideas.

To expect to successfully challenge such ineluctable forces, we must consider not only why these habits have been or remain the case, but also what we can do to ensure that they do not remain the case when new alternatives—such as the commissions advanced, to which I seek to add yet more—become available. In short, we must find ways to stop the familiar from being perpetuated in translations and commentaries and sermons as if it represented the most faithful way to read Paul exegetically, and the best way for Christians to express their ideals in speech and action.

*Newer* exegetical insights actually (should) aspire to present the most probable understanding of the *original* purpose and meaning of a text. The biblical insights to which the Synod appealed were—in my view—already present in Paul's letter *before* the traditional interpretations were created. These newer insights are thus *older* than the traditional ones; they were *familiar* before them! The ways newly proposed, albeit *defamiliarizing* today, seek to represent the ways that these texts were originally meant to be understood. They call readers back to the interpretive paradigms into which Paul was enculturating the non-Jews joining himself and other Jews in the Jewish subgroup movement that later became Christianity.<sup>17</sup> In

---

<sup>15</sup> Although interrogating the traditions for the Gospel of John in particular, see Hans Förster, "From Inner-Jewish Debate to Anti-Jewish Polemic? The Transformation of the Gospel of John within Its Textual Transmission," in *Liturgy and the Living Text of the New Testament: Papers from the Tenth Birmingham Colloquium on Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, edited by Hugh A. G. Houghton (Piscataway: Gorgias, 2018), 245–67.

<sup>16</sup> Hans Förster, "Translating from Greek as Source Language? The Lasting Influence of Latin on New Testament Translation," *JSNT* 43.1 (2020): 85–107.

<sup>17</sup> Mark D., Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm, eds., *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

effect, it is the *later* "Christian" interpreters who first created *new* interpretations to address concerns and interests as non-Jew Christians in non-Jewish cultures of their own later times. Ironically, those interpretations eventually became familiar and traditional, the implicit *old biblical insights* now in dispute by those doing the newer work to which the Synod appealed.

The newest exegetical insights should be beholden to advancing the oldest insights of the original readers. The bases for new insights existed already in the texts that the Synods could *newly privilege* because they were in fact only *newly exegeted* after centuries of neglect, neglect that reflected the (older) traditional ideological interests of interpreters who were not Paul's contemporaries any more than are we. Concomitantly, they were there to be *newly developed* and *newly applied* for guiding Christian thinking about and behavior toward Jews and Judaism in a *new way*, as partners in the people of God. The newest way, to the degree that it is exegetically and morally justified, is the oldest, most faithful way to understand what Paul sought to communicate at the origins of this movement, before it became Christianity.

For this joint endeavor, I now want to offer a few additional, even *newer biblical insights* that I believe will help advance the goals this volume celebrates.

### **Translation Alternatives for Rom 11 that Advance the Synod's Goals**

The sad fact is that even forty-years after the Commission's statements, and more than fifty-years after the Vatican Council's *Nostra Aetate* 4, a reader of Romans 11 today would encounter the same translations as did someone reading this text before or during the Shoah. One thus can hardly expect that even those beholden to these declarations will find it easy to remember, internalize, or communicate how these texts support the good will changes proposed. This is very surprising; it should not—and need not—remain the case. My recent research demonstrates the warrant for this claim, and I believe will be a very welcome resource for those who want to advance the interests of these commissions. Unfortunately, in this venue I can only introduce a few features and point you toward other published research relevant to this re-evaluation of Paul's texts.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Many of the essays are now revised and conveniently available in my *Reading Romans within Judaism*; idem, *Reading Paul within Judaism: The Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos, Vol. 1* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017). See also the details in my annotations for "Romans" in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament, Revised Edition*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York et al: Oxford University Press, 2017), 285-320; some new explorations in my "Paul: Why Bother?"; and "'All Israel Will Be Saved' or 'Kept Safe'? (Rom 11:26)." My earlier research on Rom 11 is available in *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis:

The graphic elements in the olive tree allegory contribute substantially to the prevailing replacement theological traditions, but they can, instead, and quite dramatically, help in our effort to create an entirely different way to understand how Paul's voice can help us shape a new day in Christian-Jewish relations. Throughout this exercise I rely upon the reasoning of Wittgenstein for choosing among translation alternatives: the meaning of a word is determined by the way it was or is used in the language we seek to understand. The circular problem—from which no interpreter or interpretation can be entirely free—is that one must translate each word and phrase based upon one's premises about how they are used within one's interpretation of the overall argument, and, at the same time, in a back and forth motion one must interpret the overall argument from one's premises about the usage of each word and phrase within it.

To gain creditability, new translations and interpretations require the posing and testing of new hypotheses. Thereby, historical-critical interpreters can seek to discover the alternatives that make the most sense of the text in its original context, from which interested readers can evaluate the implications that each alternative possesses for informing the interpreter's own. Our conclusions obviously should be tempered by humility, for just as we may find fault with the interpretations that we seek to upend, probabilities are not certainties, and our deductions will likely be met with challenges too; hopefully, those interpreters will improve our knowledge of how to best read the original texts as well as offer more productive ways to interpret them in service of noble goals like those of the commissions we celebrate today.

### **Problems with Appealing to Paul's Olive Tree Allegory**

The commission appealed to v. 18 of Paul's olive tree allegory (11:17–24), wherein Paul rebuked a "*wild* shoot" newly engrafted if it would look down upon the suffering of some

---

Fortress Press, 1996), ch. 5, which also explores pertinent "new" insights. Two additional relevant essays on Rom 9–11 are in German: "Römer 11 Und Christlich-Jüdische Beziehungen: Exegetische Optionen Für Eine Andere Übersetzung Und Interpretation Des Textes," in *"So Wird Ganz Israel Gerettet Werden": Arbeitshilfe Zum Israelsonntag 2014: 10. Sonntag Nach Trinitatis*, translated by Volker Haarmann, edited by Hanna Lehming, Volker Haarmann and Ursula Rudnick, (Hannover and Düsseldorf: Evangelisch-Lutherische Landeskirche Hannover, Evangelische Kirche im Rheinland, Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Norddeutschland, Begegnung von Christen und Juden Bayern, 2014), 18-25; idem, "'Gottes Gaben Und Berufungen Können Ihn Nicht Gereuen.' - Wie, Also, Sollten Wir Römer 9,1-16 (Insbesondere V. 6) Übersetzen Und Verstehen?," in *'Die Gotteskindschaft Des Jüdischen Volkes (Röm 9,1-16)': Arbeitshilfe Zum Israelsonntag 2016: 10. Sonntag Nach Trinitatis*, translated by Volker Haarmann, edited by Volker Haarmann, Ursula Rudnick and Axel Töllner (Düsseldorf/Hannover: Evangelische Kirche im Rheinland, Evangelisch-Lutherische Landeskirche Hannover, Begegnung von Christen und Juden Bayern, 2016), 14-23.

"natural branches" experiencing a break for its sake from the logical fact that, "you do not bear the root but the root you."

This verse serves as a useful and at the same time problematic choice to build upon. Prospectively useful because it shows that Paul seeks to confront the temptation to pride among the Christ-following non-Jews addressed, which is a goal of the commissions. The phrase, however, does not directly confront the traditional replacement reasoning: it does not explicitly depict the branches (representing the non-Christ following Jews) drawing from the root simultaneously. Yet the co-dependence of the new branch and the natural branches is central to the rest of the sentence and argument. In other words, one might get the impression from the phrase, when cited alone, that Paul sought to challenge arrogance toward God, but the rest of the allegory instead argues against arrogance toward Jews who do not share the addressees' convictions about the gospel. That posture logically involves pride toward God, but how the wild shoot relates to God directly is not the most salient point. Therefore, the focus of the phrase cited alone misses the point that it serves in the argument, which is how these Jesus-following non-Jews need to have their minds "renewed" to recognize that their own humble role in God's plans is inextricably tied to God's plans for Jews who are not followers of Jesus (that they have been planted "among" them, so they are co-dependent upon the same root).

In other words, within the legacy reasoning one can still envision that the new branch was inserted into the root from which the natural branches have been presumably removed, thereby "replacing" them, instead of in the direction that the Synod aimed; that is, to be drawing from the same root as the rest of the branches, and specifically, to be planted "among" the branches described as already "broken." The potential positive impact of the phrase is undermined because of the problematic way the rest of the allegory is traditionally envisioned and interpreted. A discussion of the Printer Mark/Device in the opening page of Calvin's commentaries can help illustrate the issues.



Printer's Mark of Francois Estienne for Calvin's 1563 Commentary on Psalms:  
 "Defracti sunt rami, ut ego insererer" ("They are broken off, I shall be inserted")

The Printer's Mark of Francois Estienne on the frontpage of Calvin's Commentary exemplifies not only how assumptions at work in the traditional supersessionist readings depart substantially from Paul's language, but also from Paul's original aim to bring "Christians" to look humbly at themselves and generously toward the Jews being discussed, a rhetorical aim that can be and is sometimes noted as a feature in the traditional discussions of the allegory, even if not the focus thereof. Here we witness how the traditional premises can prohibit the positive



potential for the phrase in v. 18 if it remains unsupported by the way that the rest of the elements in this allegory, as well as the arguments that precede and follow it, are translated and interpreted.

As you can see, the Mark depicts God lopping off every major natural bough and branch from the tree, which are either falling to the ground or there already, grafting in their place fully formed branches. The kneeling figure is thanking God for the mercy shown to him as a Christian. Although celebrating the mercy he believes he has received, he does not simultaneously express empathy for those whom he sees himself having replaced as the recipient of God's favor. These features are telling; they betray the working premise: the Jews, represented as branches cut off, have almost all been removed from their covenantal relationship, replaced entirely by non-Jews as Christians grafted into their place.<sup>19</sup> That Christians are other than and different from Jews is an implicit premise in this imagery (there are no full size Jewish branches still on the tree, after all).

The admonishing phrase indicates that the recipient was among the newly engrafted, his own fate was humbly dependent upon the gracious provision of the root/trunk, that is, the work of God.<sup>20</sup> Yet the Christian represented did so without being led to consider the kind of radical re-conceptualizing of respect for Jews and Judaism that the commissions sought to engender by citing this phrase, and by referring to the olive tree allegory and other elements from 9–11. One searches this illustration in vain to find any self-rebuke for supposing himself to be one of those whom he imagined had replaced the Jews. The Christian's God, as illustrated, clearly does not adhere to Paul's claim in vv. 28–29 that these Jews nevertheless remain "beloved for the sake of the fathers," or that "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable," which is quite ironic to find on a book by Calvin—who otherwise exaggerates the importance of trusting God to keep God's promises—although this concern is not expressed or implied in the Mark. A survey of commentaries on Romans makes plain that this replacement theological viewpoint remains

---

<sup>19</sup> The fact that Calvin, like some of the Estienne family and other Printers who used this and related Marks, may have been primarily focused on how they saw themselves replacing Roman Catholics (Papists) and their supposed arrogant human works versus their own supposed humble receipt of grace by faith, may contextually qualify but does not alter the fact that this finger pointing was mapped onto the Jews in these texts as if they were, like others they considered "heretics," essentially interchangeable. Moreover, when still a Catholic, Robert Estienne used versions of this olive tree Mark, as did several of his sons who returned to Paris as Catholics, and their descendants.

<sup>20</sup> One might argue that would be the husbandman, whom he shows God in the role of as the one pruning, but this metaphor, like most, has its mixed elements. I suspect that for Paul the root/trunk stood for the covenants made/planted by God with Abraham, the father of blessed Israel, in whom all the other peoples would be blessed too. In v. 29, Paul appeals to just that basis for his argumentation.

normative for many if not most interpreters of Paul's allegory to this day. The visual evidence demonstrates that the phrase in 11:18 cannot do the work it was enlisted to do, at least not without reading more than the phrase, and, just as importantly, without reading the rest of the allegory differently, than it has been—with new insights, you might say.

I am pleased to report that there are good reasons for challenging this interpretive legacy. Regardless of how easily it has been to illustrate according to the traditional interpretive paradigms, neither the interpretations nor these illustrations represent the most probable ways to understand Paul's message in its original context, that is, exegetically. Let us begin by noting a few of the discrepancies between the Printer's Mark and Paul's allegorical language.

Paul's rhetoric seems designed to create a humble, minimal, precarious place in the tree for the newly introduced wild shoot, however translated and illustrated. The Mark, however, depicts many fully formed branches already bearing mature fruit (which implies independence of need to draw from the root), whereas Paul refers to only *one* newly inserted wild *riza*, which more than likely represents an immature *shoot* (the growth that springs from a *root*).<sup>21</sup> The Christ-following non-Jews represent but an (= one) wild olive shoot inserted in an olive tree that already has many natural branches. And this shoot is *wild*—not a cultivated branch, unlike those already in the tree that represent Israelites. Paul, moreover, adamantly declares that this shoot has been inserted *among them*! Grammatically, the Greek (for agreement in gender and number between pronoun "them" and the preceding referent) requires depicting the wild shoot grafted into the tree *alongside the "some/certain" branches that have been broken*—representing the "some/certain" Israelites/Jews under discussion. In addition to many branches grafted in, since the Printer's Mark depicts almost every major natural branch *cut* as in pruned (not merely broken) entirely *off* of the tree, either on the ground already or in the process of falling there, the wild branch can hardly be grafted *among them*, for those branches are no longer on the tree.

Therefore, the Mark's imagery does not follow the text it purports to illustrate: a) Paul describes only *some/certain* branches to have been broken, and not necessarily any broken *off* (discussed below); b) only *one wild shoot* is engrafted, not many fully formed and fruit bearing branches already indistinguishable from the cultivated branches he depicts them replacing; and that one shoot is c) planted *among them*, that is, not in place of or even into the broken branches, but alongside of them into the same *root* or trunk (which according to oleocultural practice

---

<sup>21</sup> *LSJ*, 1570.

would have been inserted by way of making a cut into the trunk or bough alongside of the branches, but not by binding it into the stump of a pruned off branch).<sup>22</sup>

This last point (c) is related to the phrase cited by the commission, and I suggest it shows just how easily the force of that phrase is subverted, implicitly when not explicitly. An exemplary case in recent years is demonstrated in the RSV and NRSV post-Shoah(!) translation decision to introduce "in their place" for "among them" in v. 17 to translate *en autois*. This is an egregious mistranslation not only because it is not warranted by the Greek, but also because Paul used the phrase here precisely to combat any such replacement reasoning taking bud.

This legacy deduction makes it clear that we cannot expect the particular phrase cited by the commission to do the kind of comprehensive work that needs to be done when the sensibilities of a traditional approach to a text are so thoroughly engrained in the minds of even the most careful readers. The point it might serve is overwhelmed by the overall (mis)reading of the rest of the details from which to draw illustrations and deductions about Paul's message. It will continue to be compromised as long as the branches are translated by Calvin and envisioned in ways such as did his printer, "broken off" and "replaced" by just as many if not more "branches," which reflects the force of legacy replacement theologically reasoning that the Church has replaced historical Israel, even having become "true/spiritual Israel" in its place. I suspect that this logical conundrum led the RSV translators to introduce the idea of "fixing" Paul's language here with "in their place." One can hope that future versions will not perpetuate such substitutions.

Given this history, how can we expect readers as well as interpreters of the translations available today to avoid imagining that what Paul is communicating in the phrase cited by the commission is that the *new* branch is being inserted into the root where the *old* branches supposedly no longer exist (not to mention, that this is a branch, not branches)? Theologically, will they not reason that the insertion of the (Christian) wild branch(es, traditionally) into the root takes place where natural branches (Jews) have been removed? Can we expect them to

---

<sup>22</sup> Paul refers to the shoot drawing its life from the "root" rather than from branches, boughs, or the trunk, but that is not the place shoots are inserted according to normal oleocultural practice. Perhaps he inadvertently mixed metaphorical details with the "holy root" visual introduced in v. 16, which was not developed but suggests *vine* imagery, when he switched in v. 17 to introducing the next metaphor around the imagery of branches in an olive tree. See discussion of oleocultural practices in my essay, "'Broken Branches': A Pauline Metaphor Gone Awry? (Romans 11:11-36)," in *Reading Romans within Judaism*, 112–52; revised version of the original essay in *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9–11*, edited by Florian Wilk and J. Ross Wagner (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 339–76.

reason instead that the root into which the (Christian) wild, single shoot is inserted now exists *alongside of* the many natural branches (Israelites/Jews) that still exist there too, including those suffering temporarily "for their sake," as co-dependents of the same root/trunk, thereby advancing the message that the commissions wanted to communicate?

Let us turn to the topic of the branches broken: everything flows from—and to—the decision to read this to denote that they (and thus "the Jews" who do not convert to being "Christians") have been broken *off* (lost their covenantal standing as the people of God, despite the declaration of the commission to the contrary).

### **Prospects for Appealing to Paul's Olive Tree Allegory**

Translations and other interpretive decisions about the olive tree allegory of 11:17–24 are largely guided by the way that "some/certain" (*tines*) natural "branches" traditionally have been envisioned as branches "broken *off* [*exeklasthēsan*]." That translation decision quite clearly reflects the legacy replacement theological view that these Jews are presently no longer in the covenantal relationship they had enjoyed previously (as branches in the tree). That is exactly what is argued in the commentaries to this day. Although sometimes denied or denounced as inappropriate—that is nevertheless the obvious implication of the familiar translations for this verse and others throughout the chapter. As a result, when the verses to which the commission appeals are noted they can only represent exceptions unable to significantly alter the self-evident conclusions to be drawn from the overall imagery.

The irony of this desideratum is heightened when one considers that in the argument preceding this allegory (vv. 11–15) Paul had used the metaphor of *walking* to emphatically insist that while some Israelites have *tripped*, they have *not fallen* but *will regain their footing*. Moreover, *when* they do *catch back up* with himself and those who have been heralding the good news in the meantime, the outcome will also be all the better for the non-Jews in Christ to whom Paul addresses these explanatory remarks couched in metaphors. Paul thereby seeks to explain to them that this current scene is anomalous and temporary; it has developed so that they too can be included alongside of Israelites as representatives of the other peoples; for when the process is

concluded, as stated in v. 26, "all Israel will be saved [kept safe]."<sup>23</sup> The rest of the arguments in vv. 25–33 that follow the allegory, leading up to the "therefore" of 12:1, also highlight this positive outcome for the Israelites depicted as broken branches in the allegory. When translated to depict the branches representing those Jews removed from the tree, combined with the caveat that they could be reattached (traditionally, "grafted in again"; 11:23–24)—the message of the allegory stands in stark contradiction to the idea of continuity for which Paul otherwise argued throughout the chapter.

The current readings create a sharp contrast, even a contradiction between the message of the stumbling but not fallen metaphor, other arguments in the direction of continuity in spite of a temporary setback, *and* the olive tree allegory's imagery of a permanent removal that can, nevertheless, be reversed. The commentaries do not discuss this startling inconsistency. Yet the negative ramifications of deriving the overall theological message from the allegory as traditionally conceptualized, rather than from the other metaphors and messages of continuity, have shaped the world into which the Synod's appeal to the phrase in 11:18 must attempt to do its work. To play on familiar parables, it is difficult to reap the promising new fruit these commissions seek from the old, familiar olive tree allegory as traditionally translated and interpreted.

I am glad to share with you now why the very familiar way to illustrate the allegory is not the most probable exegetical way to do so, and not the most useful way for deducing the message Paul hoped to communicate thereby—we can exegete this allegory, and chapter, in a much more promising way.

To begin with, the familiar translations use "*broken off*" for *ekklaō* as if there were no alternatives to explore. Those branches thereby depicted as no longer in a living relationship with the root/trunk of the olive tree, which, in theological terms not only undermines the Synod's statement to the contrary, but, as mentioned earlier, it also channels the message of the phrase to which they appealed toward the Christians independent relationship with God rather than co-dependency (branch to root regardless of any other branches). The surprising good news is that *ekklaō* does not require the translation "broken [or, all the more, 'cut'] off." Lev 1:17 refers to the

---

<sup>23</sup> Although there is not space to develop the point here, this alternative would also contribute to the aims of the commission. See my, *Reading Romans within Judaism*; idem, "Romans" in *JANT*; idem, "Paul, Why Bother?"; and this topic is the focus of my, "'All Israel Will Be Saved' or 'Kept Safe'? (Rom 11:26)."

offering of a bird whose wings are "broken [*ekklasei*]" but explicitly qualified as "*not separated* [*ou dielei*]"; and Pausanias describes a wrestler winning a match because his opponent was experiencing so much pain where his toe was "*broken* [*ekklai*]," but not likely really torn off of his body; in other words, in both cases the limbs were *bent* in such a way as to be *cracked* or *sprained* (*Graeciae descriptio* 8.40.2).

If we read Paul's description as "*bent*," as in bent to the side to make room for a wild shoot to be grafted in alongside of it, or accidentally bent in the process of grafting in the new shoot, the imagery not only allows for his claim that the new shoot has been planted "among them" but also opens the way to making sense of many other elements in the allegory, and in Paul's message overall. Not without importance for this occasion, this provides a *newer*, respectful, and more promising way for Christians to conceptualize God's relationship with Jews who are not convinced of the gospel claims—and to do so by arguing that this is the *oldest* way to do so, representing the original message of the historical Paul!

Although not noted in the commentary tradition, Paul introduces the word that denotes "breaking off" only later in the allegory, in vv. 22–24—when he turns in diatribal fashion to the husbandman (God) rebuking the metaphorical *new shoot* directly if it should be tempted to look arrogantly upon the natural branches *bent* to make room for it to be inserted *among them*. Then Paul changes the descriptive word choice from *ekklaō*, used throughout vv. 17–20 to describe certain natural branches as "bent" when the shoot was engrafted to the root/trunk, to *ekkoptō* in vv. 22–24 to represent the fate of the wild shoot if it should suppose it has replaced those natural branches in God's favor (v. 21 contains neither verb). The verb *ekkoptō* was never used to describe original branches in vv. 17–21! Unlike *ekklaō*, *ekkoptō* denotes the much more severe fate that Paul warns the wild shoot it should fear suffering: it will experience ("even [*kai*]" "being *cut off*" or "*lopped off*" or "*topped*" from the tree.<sup>24</sup> Paul thereby puts the Christ-following non-Jews in their place, you might say—not only alongside of the Jews, but as an element not natural to the tree and unlike them, and thus all the more precariously placed in the root/trunk

---

<sup>24</sup> Theophrastus used *ekkoptō* for breaking off branches and topping, but did not use *ekklaō* similarly. For pruning properly, which is what Calvin's printer and many visualize, he used cognates of *diakatharsis*. For references and further details, see esp. my essay, "Broken Branches: A Pauline Metaphor Gone Awry? (Romans 11:11-36)," in *Reading Romans within Judaism*, 126–33 (112–52).

and in all the more danger should they fail to sustain "faithfulness" to that to which they are now called.<sup>25</sup>

Paul's introduction of *ekkoptō* to admonish more severely the wild shoot has led interpreters to unanimously infer that this fate should be read back into the translation of *ekklaō* to also mean "broken off," which can instead denote "bent." That decision conflates the two different Greek words Paul chose. Using two different translations, however, tracks the development of Paul's argument within the allegory. He began by describing the natural branches, but that served as a preliminary point to set up the message for the addressees as a wild shoot, not to address the original branches—Jews were not the people group he sought to persuade with this message. The point was that the new shoot should *not* be arrogantly dismissive of the natural branches; rather, (and albeit based on zero sum assumptions that one might question whether necessary when conceptualizing the potential of a Creator God) the wild shoot should recognize that the temporary, present suffering of the bent branches has been to the benefit of themselves, for they are able now to be incorporated among them. The wild shoot thus should be concerned about how to serve the best interests of the natural branches who are presently suffering for its sake, which ultimately will serve its own best interests all the more.

Paul's description need not suggest visually or theologically that more than a few of the branches already in the tree were affected, and, indeed, to make space for one shoot would not require bending to the side more than a few branches—and, to speak directly to the legacy imagery, to the need to break off, *much less cut off even one* original branch! Olive tree grafts are not made into a place where a branch was pruned off, but into the branch or trunk itself by way of making a slit into which the shoot can be placed, quite unlike the Printer's Mark depicts. Thus Paul's language leaves open the possibility that the branches are to be understood to have been bent accidentally in the process of grafting in a new shoot, rather than purposefully to make room for it. Note too that the shoot is warned much more severely in vv. 19–24 than most translations

---

<sup>25</sup> That the issue revolves being *faithful* or *loyal* is obscured when *pistis* is translated in the traditional way, as *belief* or *faith*. Paul's argument is about *faithfulness*: first, for the Israelites being discussed to be *faithful* to herald the good news to the nations alongside of those who are, like Paul; and second, for the Christ-following non-Jews Paul is targeting with this message, who must be *faithful* to the role they play in God's "mysterious" plan by remaining humble and grateful and respectful of those Jews (the message following ch. 11 that occupies the rest of the letter), regardless of the resentment that they might be tempted to exhibit if their claims to membership are not accepted on the gospel's terms. The warning to be cut off is for failure to be faithful to the humble way of thinking and behaving to which Paul is calling them here; the issue is not whether they believe in Jesus Christ or not: Paul's confidence of these non-Jews' belief in the gospel is the premise upon which his entire argument for continued faithfulness with respect to how they respond to these Jews depends.

communicate, in order to compel it to take a humble view of itself and its relationship not only to the root/trunk/tree but also to the branches suffering presently—the newly engrafted shoot is to "be afraid [*fobou*]" (v. 20) because if it should "boast" against the natural branches "you *even will be cut off*" the tree (v. 21).<sup>26</sup>

The force of Paul's *a fortiori* inference is lost in most translations, but magnified if one follows the allegorical movement from branches that have suffered a crack when bent to the fate that the newly introduced branch will suffer "all the more" if it thinks and behaves ungraciously toward them, the fate of being purposely cut off. Having been grafted in, it follows that the shoot is in a much more precarious relationship to the root than those branches that were there already as a result of the tree's natural growth, regardless of the present anomalous (and also precarious) state of some of them.

Paul developed this allegory to communicate to these Christ-following non-Jews that the current doubt they were witnessing among some of Paul's fellow Jews regarding their innovative claim to have joined them as members of the people of God—by way of the declaration of the gospel apart from becoming members of Israel—was both temporary and a part of God's design. Some (as natural branches already in the cultivated tree from birth) were suffering presently for doubting the claims of the gospel, and thus not heralding to the other peoples of the *kosmos* (yet, with Paul) the good news that members of the other peoples (as if a wild shoot engrafted) can join alongside of Israelites as people of God, although apart from becoming members of Israel (as a wild shoot, not natural to the tree).<sup>27</sup> They now have been planted among the natural branches (whether convinced of this gospel based claim or not)—so that together they may constitute the overall tree (the people of God) by way of Jesus Christ (through a cut made into

---

<sup>26</sup> *NRSV* softens the warning significantly: v. 20 "but stand in awe"; v. 21: "perhaps he will not spare you."

<sup>27</sup> Paul begins the allegory with theoretical "but if [*ei de*]" in v. 17. The "they" who are pictured hypothetically as already "bent branches" represent Israelites who do not share Paul's (also a natural branch) and his addressees' (the wild shoot's) convictions about Jesus as Messiah—or, more probably, about whether this "gospel" truth claim should be announced now to the other peoples by Israel. Doing so would logically require being persuaded of the gospel claim that the awaited end of the ages has arrived with Jesus as Messiah, but that issue does not seem to be as salient for Paul's argument as is confronting the temptation to respond resentfully to the resistance by some Jews to the claims of the non-Jews about the gospel. Paul's argument revolves around the question of the culpability of Jews to herald this news to them. For details, see essays in my *Reading Romans within Judaism*; and for more detailed discussion of how Paul's argument draws from the chronometrical claims for the gospel per the Shema Israel, see "Paul and the Jewish Tradition: The Ideology of the Shema," in *Reading Paul within Judaism: The Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos, Vol. 1* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 108–26, revised from the original essay in *Celebrating Paul. Festschrift in Honor of Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P., and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.*, edited by Peter Spitaler (CBQMS 48; Washington D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2012), 62–80.



the trunk/root to provide for the graft). In due time the bent branches will be "reinvigorated" to bear fruit,<sup>28</sup> with Paul, by joining him to declare this news, which is Israel's special calling (Rom 3:1–2). That is how, Paul reasons, God (the husbandman and root) designed this mysterious process, so that all would be equally grateful for God's mercy toward themselves (vv. 30–36).

These details support the warrant to translate Paul's Greek to indicate that some/certain branches were "bent," not broken *off*. Whether bent to make room for the wild shoot to be engrafted or accidentally bent in the process of engrafting, they have been injured—in terms of bent branches perhaps split or cracked—and thus are in need of protection (been "temporarily callused") so they can heal and continue to bear fruit,<sup>29</sup> but none of them have been removed from the tree!

The Synod's declaration of "the permanent election of the Jewish people" would thereby be communicated in Paul's imagery. The root bears Israel and the Church together at the same time; neither replaces the other nor should reason from such zero-sum formulas when considering the interpretive options to explore. Each party should wrestle with this humbling conundrum by expressing generosity toward the other; that is the fruitful way, according to Paul, for "renewed minds" to understand God's "mysterious" processes of reconciling the *kosmos* during the present, temporary, anomalous state of affairs.

---

<sup>28</sup> According to normal usage, *enkentrizō* denoted "spurring on," "prodding," "goadings," "pricking," and "stinging," not usually having to do with the process of "grafting" (*LSJ*, 471). If discussing plants, in this case branches and thus a tree that has suffered an injury, the purpose of the action would be to introduce some action *to stimulate* or *invigorate* healthiness, growth, and fruitfulness. Therefore, Paul's choice of language can communicate that previously healthy branches that had suffered from being bent could be re-invigorated to renewed health and fruitfulness. The traditional interpretation revolves around the assumption that the branches have been broken off, and thus are in need of being "grafted in again." For fuller discussion, see my "Paul, Why Bother?"; idem, "'All Israel Will Be Saved' or 'Kept Safe'? (Rom 11:26)"; a detailed study of this specific translation proposal is in development.

<sup>29</sup> The normal lexical meaning of *pōrōsis*, which Paul used in 11:25 just after the allegorical description of these Israelites as natural branches, is not the familiar translation "hardened," usually explained in terms of rejecting the gospel because stubborn (often likened to Pharaoh's heart, but for Pharaoh Paul used a different word, *sklēros*, in 9:19, as did Exod). The usual meaning is "callused," which involves hardening of an area that suffered a break in order to keep it alive for the health of the rest of the tree as well as to be able to bear fruit again. In keeping with Paul's message, "callused" would indicate a protective development originating from the root to protect a branch or branches where a "temporary" (*apo merous*) injury has occurred. That would be consistent with Paul's aim throughout to elicit sympathy, not disregard, and to argue that God will use these tactics for the good of the Israelites characterized as bent branches as well as for the addressees' good as a wild shoot, so that they do not think and act arrogantly. Paul sought thereby to help these non-Jews understand that circumstances are different than they might appear to be so that they might think and act properly from "renewed minds." See my "'Callused,' Not 'Hardened': Paul's Revelation of Temporary Protection until All Israel Can Be Healed," in *Reading Romans within Judaism*, 153–78; revised version of original essay in, *Reading Paul in Context: Explorations in Identity Formation: Essays in Honour of William S. Campbell*, edited by Kathy Ehrensperger and J. Brian Tucker (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 52–73.

## Conclusion

To this day, even the most generously inclined will find it difficult to read Romans 11 in the familiar translations without wondering if the reasoning to which the Synod appealed authentically represents what Paul probably meant to communicate. Many have grown accustomed to the need to downplay if not dispute the role of Paul's voice as traditionally translated and interpreted, because that voice played an identifiable role in the legacy of harmful discourses and policies toward Jews and Judaism (and not without similarity, e.g., toward women). Those able to read the Greek are used to translating his voice by way of the familiar glosses, because, well, they already know that is what Paul meant from the translations and interpretations they knew already, so those glosses appear to be self-evidently sufficient. Moreover, entries in the familiar theological lexicons, workbooks, and commentaries often lend support to the traditional translations, including the legacy preference for those that cast negative light on Jews and Judaism. When the translations have been long settled, there appears to be little to no need to re-examine the Greek.

In other words, ironically, the obstacle to changing the riverbed by appealing to "new biblical insights" begins also with the current translations and interpretations of the elements that today's readers still encounter when reading the text of Romans 11—that is, familiarity with the course of the river where it has seemingly always run. Can we really expect to harvest the new fruit the Synod hoped to sow from the familiar way that Paul's allegorical tree has been translated and interpreted, which was developed in the service of traditional Christian versus Jewish interests? Probably not. But as this brief discussion of the original texts demonstrates, we need not—should not—confine ourselves to doing so.

My sincere hope is that the discussion of some of these obstacles, coupled with additional new insights that support the aims of the commissions' statements, will lead to the making of yet more additional advances by those who might be able to help us escape the raging river of the familiar and its legacy of harmful outcomes. That legacy has been fed by translations, interpretations, pastoral homilies, public discourses, and illustrations that perpetuate ideological premises the commissions disavowed. New proposals in each of these areas will encounter declamations that they are inadequate, ideological, immoral, ignorant, and arrogant, and of

course eisegetical; after all, for nearly two thousand years the idea of looking elsewhere for the original riverbed, now perhaps dry, has not been explored.

Undertaking the enormous work required to uncover a new paradigmatic course through which more promising ways of conceptualizing and living with each other can flow will be not be an easy task, and not welcomed by everyone. Yet for those inspired by the Synod's aims, the results may be judged akin to the arrival of fresh, living water, or perhaps better—and in the tradition of mixed metaphors—like the fullness of new fruit springing from a newly grafted in shoot alongside the fruitful older branches already living on the tree.