

Mark Nanos's Impact on New Testament Studies 30 Years On  
Paul within Judaism Section (S22-321)

John Van Maaren  
University of Vienna  
John.vanmaaren@univie.ac.at

Among today's panelists, I am fairly certain that I encountered Mark Nanos's work the latest. Whereas some of us *organized* an early review panel of Mark's Romans book at SBL nearly three decades ago—1997 specifically—I first encountered Mark's work exactly ten years ago as a wide-eyed PhD student trying to figure out what this overwhelming Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting was all about in 2015. As such, I can speak perhaps to the impact of Mark's work on a second generation of scholars.

Both encounters at that Atlanta meeting left an impression. The first was at a review session of the just published Fortress volume, *Paul within Judaism: restoring the first-century context to the apostle*, edited by Mark Nanos and today's chair, Magnus Zetterholm. It was a medium sized room, and it was packed—standing room only—with interested faces peering in from outside the door. I was there because this idea of Paul within Judaism promised to decenter the Paul I knew and allow me to re-encounter an ancient writer who sometimes feels so familiar. The discussion was animated and engaging and I left with questions that eventually led to my 2023 ZNW article grappling with the method questions that “within Judaism” raises and that the panel reviewers said needed answering.

The second impression was the following day at a session titled “For Paul, Do Jews Have to Become Christians to be Saved?,” this time in one of those huge rooms seemingly meant for a keynote or presidential address and which can make even a large audience seem small, though for this session's popularity the room did not dwarf the audience, with many drawn especially because of the session's relevance—and for some the radical suggestions—for Christian theology and Jewish-Christian relations. I left that SBL with the impression that this area of scholarship was both a meaningful way to re-encounter what eventually became the foundational texts of later Christianity, and an awareness of its popularity. My impression of Mark's presentations specifically—I was too new to venture to meet him in person that year—was refreshing—someone raising meaningful questions and framing all of it as possibilities for further reflection and refinement through continuing conversation in collaboration with session participants and detractors. This type of posture of mutual discovery, when possible, I still see as some of the best of the ethics of biblical scholarship and made we want to stay engaged with Mark's work and the subfield that he had a large role in jump starting.

Today I want to reflect specifically on Mark's Romans book, *The Mystery of Romans*, since my current project at the University of Vienna is likewise on social questions related to Paul's letter to the Roman Christ-followers. This book, as most of us know, made an immediate splash, receiving the 1996 National Jewish Book Award for Jewish-Christian Relations, becoming the focal point of sessions at the SNTS and SBL meetings in 1997 and CBA in 1998 and evoking reactions among its reviewers ranging from enthusiastic endorsement (especially those in ecumenical or theological publications),<sup>i</sup> to cautious optimism (Neil Elliot),<sup>ii</sup> to regret that the argument is not fully convincing (e.g., James Dunn),<sup>iii</sup> to offense at the argument—at least partly because it

does not mention Jesus enough (Jerome Murphy-O'Connor).<sup>iv</sup> Yet all—with the exception of Murphy-O'Connor—expressed appreciation for the volume, and its importance for the future study of Paul,<sup>v</sup> with AJ Levine noting, for example, that part of its ability to open new possibilities is that it was written outside the typical academic track of PhD dissertation, etc.<sup>vi</sup> I can say, from my own perspective, Mark, I am so glad you took the time to write this first book, and that you decided to continue working on Paul for the past thirty years. It and your work have been a continual source of ideas that have challenged my thinking.

Today I want to focus specifically on Romans 13:1–7—Paul's instructions to obey "authorities"—whom Mark argued were synagogue authorities and not Roman authorities.<sup>vii</sup> Reviews described this as the most "innovative" and "questionable" aspect of the book. The basic criticisms in subsequent literature were, first, that the terms for the authorities and their taxes fit a Roman administrative context too neatly and are mostly unattested in synagogue or other association settings, and, second, that describing synagogue discipline with the metaphor of sword was unlikely and inexplicably violent.<sup>viii</sup> These critiques have been persuasive enough that the most recent treatments of Romans that situate themselves in the tradition of Pauline scholarship prompted by Mark's work and acknowledging their indebtedness to it do not mention his argument in their treatments of Romans 13:1–7. I am thinking of the 2023 commentary by William Campbell and the 2018 published dissertation of Jacob Mortensen.<sup>ix</sup> I, however, was intrigued, and wanted to double check the plausibility of the reading, since I wanted it to be true. While the use of the titles and taxes within the Roman administration have been well researched,<sup>x</sup> the use of "sword" as metaphor had not, with responses to Nanos' reading limiting themselves to the term's use in the Septuagint, Josephus, and examples listed in standard Greek dictionaries. So, I looked through the approximately 400 occurrences of μάχαира—Paul's term translated "sword" in Rom 7:4—in the TLG database from around 200 BCE to 200 CE.

The majority of these occurrences of μάχαира refer to either a physical sword ( ) or as a way of dying violently, sometimes grouped with other means (famines, earthquakes). To my disappointment I found no examples where sword symbolized being even only injured by a sword—rather than killed—much less disciplined in some less violent way. In the few examples where it is used as a metaphor for something other than death, it indicates cruelty,<sup>xi</sup> anger<sup>xii</sup> and occasionally speech that may be destructive like a sword<sup>xiii</sup> or (positively) speech that quickly separates silly ideas from true ones like a well sharpened sword.<sup>xiv</sup> To add to my disappointment, I found that the earliest reception history of Rom 13:1–7 also assumes a Roman administrative context,<sup>xv</sup> though interestingly Origen notes that Heracleon—incorrectly according to Origen—applies Paul's phrase "one who does not bear the sword in vain" to Moses, specifically because of his role as lawgiver.<sup>xvi</sup> This provides some ancient precedent for Mark's association of the sword with discipline based on the practical authority of Torah. Still, in the end, I am forced to also find Paul's instructions to refer to Roman state actors and that Paul dangerously attributes to them divine sanction in his efforts to convince the Roman Christ-adherents not to rebel. While this does not mean that Paul's Christ-groups and/or those Christ-groups in Rome are separate from the synagogue, it does mean, in my evaluation, that Rom 13:1–7 does not demonstrate their participation.

What, then, to do with Paul's instructions? Mark framed his treatment of Romans 13:1–7 as an alternative to the "tragic results of the traditional interpretation," noting specifically its use for rationalizing Christian support for the Nazi regime.<sup>xvii</sup> To the

existing literature on the harmful reception history of Paul's instructions, I can add its use among early, pre-Baur arguments about the addressees of Romans, when at least five studies between 1800 and 1835 see these instructions not to rebel against the authorities as addressing a specifically Jewish tendency for societal unrest, part of a wider Judeophobic tendency in historical critical scholarship.<sup>xviii</sup> Mark's attempt, then, can be grouped with a variety of other attempts to develop less dangerous readings of Paul's apparent divine sanction of authoritarian state violence against vulnerable persons. These attempts include treating it as a later addition to Paul's real letter, despite no manuscript evidence;<sup>xix</sup> arguments that Paul is talking about cosmic powers working through earthly actors, and so not transferable to other authoritarian regimes,<sup>xx</sup> and, most recently, arguments that Paul is writing with a "hidden transcript" in which seemingly positive statements about authoritarian regimes cloak hidden critiques.<sup>xxi</sup> In this context, Mark's reading appears to be as plausible and more contextually embedded than all but possibly the latter, even as each has gotten significantly more traction than his. However, the implausibility of each of these attempts, combined with the voluminous literature attempting to reconcile Paul's statements with the experience of persons living under authoritarian and often oppressive regimes suggests that maybe Paul's statements, when attributed authority, may be about as dangerous as they have traditionally been understood to be and we are better off starting by acknowledging this.

For those of us concerned about the possible uses of Paul's instructions about governing authorities today,<sup>xxii</sup> especially in the face of increasing authoritarianism in many parts of our world, what if we focus not on making Paul's instructions more palatable for today, but position Paul among other attempts at self- or in-group survival in the context of possible state persecution. In first-century Rome we could think about Roman prohibitions of *collegia* and related associations, attested as close to Paul as the time of Augustus and again during the Flavian period, especially because of their potential for societal unrest.<sup>xxiii</sup> In such a context official action against *collegia* would at the least be a plausible threat in the 50s CE. A likely explanation for the prevalence of what we call associations in Rome and throughout the empire despite state action against them is that they only risked prohibition when they attracted official attention.<sup>xxiv</sup> In such a context, not submitting to the Roman authorities risked unwanted attention and a possible ban or closer state surveillance by being labeled a *collegium*. The concern might be only heightened by the discovery that Paul promoted a "kingdom of God" easily imagined as a competitor to Rome.

In this context, Paul's instructions and his reasoning that the authorities are actually just in their use of the sword because they are placed there by the Jewish God—problematic when universalized—can be seen as a coping strategy of interpretive denial.<sup>xxv</sup> Such coping strategies, according to social psychology, explain the threat of oppression as something other than oppression—in the Roman case as a part of the cosmic order ruled by the Jewish God—and so alleviate the psychological stress of oppression. While recent literature emphasizes that such strategies perpetuate unjust social orders by promoting accommodation rather than social action, it also notes that such strategies are common in contexts where persons lack a belief in the possibility of social change.<sup>xxvi</sup> Paul, then, and his addressees insofar as they adopted his instructions, can be paralleled with other groups and their strategies for coping among the threat—or reality—of majority culture discrimination and oppression, often with state backing. In the recent literature I list examples of (1) the Ahmadiyah Islamic reformist movement in Indonesia attributing their precarious situation among

Indonesia's increasingly conservative Islam to fundamentalist Islamic influences from outside of Indonesia, especially Saudia Arabia and Pakistan, in order to retain an image of Indonesia as inherently tolerant.<sup>xxvii</sup>

(2) Israeli Palestinians on the set of Israeli drama series *Fauda* protecting their precarious place in the Israeli society and job market by alternatively adopting western secular forms of dress and behavior as a form a Jewish Israeli mimicry and simultaneously playing into stereotypes of traditional Palestinian culture as survival strategies, and so reinforcing Israeli Jewish perceptions of difference both on the set and in the stereotypical roles they play in the show.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Or, to take a historical example, among Christ-adherents facing Roman oppression in Asia-minor in the early second century, reinterpreting suffering as necessary to prompt cosmic action and as accumulating rewards in the celestial realm.<sup>xxix</sup> Similar coping strategies can be documented among Jewish communities in European cities at many times over the past millennium.

If we position Paul and the Roman Christ-groups among these types of groups, it does not make the implications of Paul's strategy less problematic when universalized, but it does allow problematic instructions to be contextualized as not uncommon parts of coping and retaining agency in situations outside of one's control.

In conclusion, even ultimately unpersuasive readings—such as the authorities in Rom 13 as synagogue leaders—are an important part of our shared knowledge project<sup>xxx</sup> that we might call academic biblical studies as they force us to rethink tacit assumptions. I see Mark's work as an enduring contribution to this rethinking, driven especially by persons asking questions from positionalities that may begin from outside the dominant discourse of New Testament studies and hopefully end up incorporated into the shared discourse, as the within Judaism approach has been. These positionalities are continuing to expand, I think, especially as we listen to more and more diversity of voices especially from majority world scholars working from outside the major centers of knowledge production in North America and western Europe. There is lots of room for progress in the historical reconsideration of the earliest Christ movement by listening to more and more voices, and Mark's contributions are an especially influential example of this.

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<sup>i</sup> Esp. John James Clabeaux, "The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35.1 (1998): 123–24; Mary C. Orr, "The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 51.3 (1997): 317–18.

<sup>ii</sup> Neil Elliott, "The Mystery of Romans," *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 18.1 (1997): 103–7.

<sup>iii</sup> James D. G. Dunn, "The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter," *JTS* 48.2 (1997): 599–603.

<sup>iv</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "Review of The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter, by Mark D. Nanos," *RB* 103 (1996): 621–23.

<sup>v</sup> In addition to those listed above, see Peter J. Tomson, *Review of The Mystery of Romans. The Jewish Context of Paul's Letters*, by Mark D. Nanos, *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 28.3 (1997): 345–47; Henry Wansbrough, "Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?; Judaism in the New Testament: Practices and Beliefs; The Shema in the New Testament: Deut. 6:4-5 in Significant Passages; The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter," *Journal of Jewish Studies* (1997): 151–54.

<sup>vi</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Review of The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter*, by Mark D. Nanos, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 89.1/2 (1998): 222–24, esp. 224.

<sup>vii</sup> Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 289–336.

<sup>viii</sup> Esp. A. Andrew Das, *Solving the Romans Debate* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 146; Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 331–33.

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Cf. Stefan Krauter, *Studien zu Röm 13,1–7: Paulus und der politische Diskurs der neronischen Zeit*, WUNT 243 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 27–28.

<sup>ix</sup> Jacob P. B. Mortensen, *Paul among the Gentiles: A “radical” Reading of Romans*, *Neutestamentliche Entwürfe zur Theologie* 28 (Tübingen: Narr Francke, 2018), 321–23; William S. Campbell, *Romans: A Social Identity Commentary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 343–51.

<sup>x</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 310; Bruce Winter, “Roman Law and Society in Romans 12–15,” in *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church*, ed. Peter Oakes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 67–102.

<sup>xi</sup> Plutarchus, *De Iside et Osiride* (Stephanus page 355 section C line 3)

<sup>xii</sup> Philoxenus, Gramm. Fragmenta 567 l 4, 12; Artemidorus Onir. 2.31.8; Achilles Tatius, Scr. ERot. Leucippe et Clitophon 6.10.4.3.

<sup>xiii</sup> Psalm 56:5; Prov 12:18; 24:22c; Prov 25:18; 30:14; Sir 28:18.

<sup>xiv</sup> Clemens Romanus *Homiliae* 11.19.2 l. 2; Tryphon I. *Περὶ τρόπων* 194 l. 7.

<sup>xv</sup> Hippolytus, *In Danielelem* 3.23 l 13; Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 2.84 l 22; Chrysostom, *In Genesim* 54.596 l. 17.

<sup>xvi</sup> (358) Heracleon, however, does not refer the words, “There is one who seeks and judges,” to the Father, when he makes the following comments. “He who seeks and judges is the one who avenges me, the servant who has been appointed for this, who does not bear the sword in vain (ὁ μὴ εἰκῆ τὴν μάχαιραν φορῶν), the avenger of the king. Now this is Moses, as he said to them earlier, when he said, ‘On whom you have hoped.’” (359) Then he continues, “It is Moses who judges and punishes, that is, the lawgiver himself.” Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John, Books 13–32*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* 89 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 279.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Mystery of Romans*, 290n3.

<sup>xviii</sup> Gottfried Eichhorn and Johannes Hemsén argue that Paul urged civic obedience precisely to help the Roman rulers to distinguish Christians from what they imagine to be the restless Jews. Eichhorn writes “Es war daher nichts schicklicher, als dass einer der ersten Wortführer der Religion der Ruhe, des Friedens und des bürgerlichen Gehorsams, den römischen Christen die Untertanenpflichten ins Andenken zurückbrachte und sie vor allem Schein des Ungehorsams und des Aufruhrs warnte, damit man endlich unruhige Juden von.” *Einleitung in Das Neue Testament*, 5 vols. (Weidmann, 1804–1827), 219–20; cf. 231; Johannes Tychsen Hemsén, *Der Apostel Paulus: Sein Leben, Wirken und Seine Schriften* (Göttingen: Deiterich, 1830), 417. Leonhard Bertholdt reasons that Paul addresses specifically the Jewish Christians, since they would be more prone to civic unrest. *Historisch Kritische Einleitung in Sämmtliche Kanonische und Apokryphische Schriften des Alten und Neuen Testaments*, 7 vols. (Erlangen: Palmeschen, 1812), 6.3277. Johann Friedrich Flatt (*Vorlesungen über den Brief Pauli an die Römer* [Tübingen: Fues, 1825], 485) and Heinrich Klee (*Commentar über des Apostel Paulus Sendschreiben an die Römer* [Mainz: Kupferberg, 1830], 17–18) express similar sentiments.

<sup>xix</sup> E.g., J. Kallas, “Romans XIII. 17: An Interpolation,” *New Testament Studies* 11 (1964): 365–74.

<sup>xx</sup> Documented by Charles E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975) 2:657–59 (1979 page numbers); Douglas J. Moo, *Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 795–96 (update to 2018 edition).

<sup>xxi</sup> Critiqued in Laura Robinson, “Hidden Transcripts: Revisiting Paul’s Political Theology in Light of Early Christian Social Practices,” in *Empire Criticism of the New Testament*, ed. Christopher Heilig, WUNT 530 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2025), 195–216.

<sup>xxii</sup> Recently, see Benson O. Igboin, “A Critical Appropriation of Romans 13:1–7 in Contemporary African Politics,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 81.1 (2025): 1–7; David Thang Moe, “Reading Romans 13:1–7 as a Hidden Transcript of Public Theology: A Dialogue between James C. Scott and Anti-Coup Protesters in Myanmar,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 17.2 (2023): 226–45; Ishanesu S. Gusha, “Exegesis of Romans 13:1–7 and Its Appropriation to the New Dispensation of the Second Republic of Zimbabwe,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 76.1 (2020): 1–9; Otniel Aurelius Nole, “Hubungan Umat dan Pemerintah: Studi Hermeneutik terhadap Roma 13:1–7,” *Huperetes: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristen* 4.2 (2023): 140–54; D. Glenn Butner, “Undocumented Prudent Immigrants: De-Centering Romans 13 and Rule of Law in Immigration Ethics,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 38.3 (2023): 62–83.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Suetonius, Augustus, 32.1. “all associations (*collegia*), those only excepted which were of ancient standing, and recognized by the laws, were dissolved.”

<sup>xxiv</sup> Benedikt Eckhardt, *Romanisierung und Verbrüderung: das Vereinswesen im römischen Reich*, *KLIO* 34 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 17–35.

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<sup>xxv</sup> Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge, UK: Malden, MA: Polity, 2001).

<sup>xxvi</sup> Nia L. Phillips, Glenn Adams, and Phia S. Salter, "Beyond Adaptation: Decolonizing Approaches to Coping with Oppression," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 3.1 (2015): 365–87, esp. 367.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Aleah Connley, "Understanding the Oppressed: A Study of the Ahmadiyah and Their Strategies for Overcoming Adversity in Contemporary Indonesia," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35.1 (2016): 29–58, esp. 42.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Amal Jamal, "Subaltern Agency in the Cultural Industries: Palestinian Creative Labor in the Israeli Series *Fauda*," *International Journal of Communication* 14.1 (2020): 2403–21, esp. 2413–14.

<sup>xxix</sup> Miguel-Ángel García-Madurga, "Resistance of an Emerging Community: Early Christians Facing Adversity," *Histories* 5.3 (2025): 1–21.

<sup>xxx</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: Social Science and the Global Dynamics of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).