

ROMANS AND THE POWER
OF THE BELIEVER

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OF THE BELIEVER

Richard J. Britton

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of my close friend Simon Mapp
and is also for Olivia, Ruby, and Chloe*

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FOREWORD

Getting a word in edgeways was often a challenge. A gradually rotating cast, particularly David, Stephen, Elif, Andy, Soon Yi, and Richard himself (although not the unperceived, yet real, Pyung-Soo, who was elsewhere doing things such as actually writing his dissertation), crammed into the office in the basement of the west wing. The students in my first substantial PhD group modeled the kind of vigorous, deeply inclusive, academic engagement now seen in Richard's marvelous book.

Richard's book gives great attention in three directions: radical theory, surprising detail, and big questions. On theory, Richard carries out Derridean deconstruction within a framework that is substantively creative. He also manages the rare feat of expressing such theoretical approaches very lucidly. You will come away from this book with a better appreciation of Derrida as well as of Romans. The use of theory is complemented by an eye for unusual, fascinating detail, both in the text of Romans and in a set of other ancient texts that you are unlikely to have encountered before. Both the theory and the detail then build towards the largest of questions. For Richard, the power of the believer not only is the power to interpret, as one would rightly expect from Richard's theoretical stance, but a power that radically reenvision the relations of agency between the divine and the human. It has been a great pleasure to be involved in Richard's research, and it is a great pleasure to commend his book to you.

Peter Oakes
Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis
University of Manchester, UK

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FOREWORD

This challenging but accessible analysis of Paul's Letter to the Romans is as much a study of the *interpreter* as it is the text to be interpreted. The onus is placed on the reader of the biblical text (be they ancient or modern) as an active agent in their own relationship with the divine. Resisting a wholly one-way, top-down model of God's influence, the believing reader of Romans is viewed as fully participating and determining the evolving contours of the divine plan. Long-debated issues are creatively upended by bringing into conversation Roman writers and lesser-known individuals mentioned in documentary papyri with poststructuralists (most significantly Derrida) and cognitive linguists, among others. The result is an appreciation of a deeper complexity of meaning both in Romans and near-contemporary comparative sources than traditionally acknowledged, both for their readers and users in antiquity and today.

There is a rich tapestry of ideas here for those with interest in a range of related disciplines and critical approaches that this book weaves together, including sociocultural exegesis, theology, philosophy, semiotics, and linguistics. Yet, even when the hermeneutical benefits of deconstruction theory and the almost boundless possibilities of metaphorical language in Romans are put aside, the framing of this study in relation to the real-world implications of interpreting religious literature is powerful. Both for individuals and communities, the metanarrative confronts the dangers of assumed passivity to a pure and unalterable truth among Christian readers of biblical texts (and by extension adherents of other textually focused religions or philosophies). The concluding words of this book explicitly invite believers and citizens—active participants in religious and/or nonreligious life—to recognize and embrace the power of their own individual agency and impact upon the meanings and values of these spheres. If this challenge rightly appeals, then I recommend *Romans*

and the Power of the Believer as an excellent place to begin the necessary critical reflection.

Kimberley A. Fowler
University of Glasgow, UK

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PREFACE

I will never forget those halcyon days at the University of Manchester between 2009 and 2014. I had taken voluntary redundancy from a busy and challenging career in college lecturing to pursue my master's degree and then my doctorate in Religions and Theology, which I had an urge to do. Through the inspirational teaching of Peter Oakes, I became enthralled by the poetics of the New Testament, especially the Pauline corpus. I have the fondest memories of our peer group tutorial in the basement of the Samuel Alexander Building West Wing, with David, Stephen, Andy, Elif, and others, such as Soon Ye and Isaac, in which Peter would give us that added value of academic career advice, moral support, and exciting discussion. I remember the dark corridors and the serpentine bannisters.

Thursday was always our departmental day where we might audit some lectures and tutorials first, have our group supervision late morning, and then enjoy a lunch together and grab a coffee (and snack) before the inspiring—if sometimes intimidating—Ehrhardt Seminar, in which we ran an unofficial bingo on whether Cynics or Stoics might be mentioned. Kimberley Fowler and Francesca Frazer, from other supervision groups, would also be there. For lunch we might go to the Vegetarian Cafe with its inquisitive dog or to the Simon Building for a build-your-own-stir-fry, which was coordinated by a passionate chef. I now realize that these are the experiences you can never reconstruct—once they end, once people move away, graduate, or move home, they are gone, but the memories are treasures that are a privilege to retain.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Peter Oakes. His wisdom, kindness and faith, at all stages, knew no bounds.

On the same level, I thank my husband Paul Williams, who lived day-to-day with both my doctoral study and then the process of writing this book. I am immensely grateful for all of his encouragement, love, and faith, which you will be able to read in the spirit of this book.

I thank my mother Rosemary Gillian Britton and my father Stephen John Britton for their high expectations of me from a young age and the unwavering support they gave to my academic ambitions, both materially and spiritually. I also thank my maternal grandfather Andrew Thomson and my paternal grandmother Ethne Britton for all of the time they spent with me encouraging me to write and learn. As the dedication shows, I am eternally grateful for the support of my close friend Simon Mapp. I thank Katie and Ellie for their love and support.

I thank Jeremy Tambling, who mixed humor with occasional sharpness to help me get to grips with the quantum mechanics that is Derridean critical theory.

I thank my sister Jemma Britton, who, through her struggles and bravery, taught me about the wonderful spirituality of Alcoholics Anonymous, and my brother Chris Britton, who shares my taste for movies, music, and comedy.

I thank Lynn Trillo for all her practical and emotional support throughout my studies.

I thank Jacqueline Hidalgo, Steed Davidson, and Gerald West for having faith in this book and for all their intensive support and feedback. I thank Nicole L. Tilford for her work editing this manuscript.

I am truly grateful to Gordon Stewart FRCO, Jane and David Forshaw, Jane Kear, Val and Phil Dangerfield, Penny Noon, Sheena Cartledge, Elizabeth and Michael Brueck, Anne Shields, Viv and Phil Knott, Reverend Alison Termie, and many others at my second home of Providence United Reformed Church in New Mills, who have lived with me through the process of getting this done, with love.

I am grateful to Ward Blanton and Michael Hoelzl for offering me suggestions on this book.

I thank David Harvey, Kimberley Fowler, Stephen MacBay, Andy Boakye, Elif Karaman, Charlotte Naylor, and Francesca Frazer for all their advice and academic fellowship.

I thank the following who have given me emotional and practical support: Daniel Lamont, Joan Jones, my parents-in-law Mary and Graham Williams, Karen and Graham Broderick, my late uncle Leonard Hansford, my late aunt Jennifer Weiss, my aunt Linda Thomson and uncle Jasper, my aunt Claire and uncle Vincent Hooper, my uncle Clive and my aunt Jan Britton, my aunt Lorraine Britton, my uncle Tim and my aunt Jane Thomson, my cousins Michael Johnson and Ben Ellis, my cousin Daniel Britton, my cousins Kieran and Ryan Hooper, my nieces Olivia and Ruby Brit-

ton and Chloe Broderick, my sister-in-law Sam Britton, our good friends Elizabeth and Jason Nagle and Marja Ilo and Teemu Pihlatie, Elaine Jones, Simon Catterall, Sara Hartley, Paul Protheroe, Sara Grumble, Matthew Ryder, Ian Southon, Ursula Southon, Derek Trillo, Pam Baker, Geraldine Mapp, Janet Oakes, Reverend Mark Townsend, Fiona Chisnall, Jeremy Davis, Elizabeth Robins, Calia Swain, and David Gilbert. Lastly, I thank all of my other family members, friends, and work colleagues, who have offered me so much love and support.

After studying for my master's degree and achieving it with a high level of distinction, I won a departmental scholarship. As such, I am grateful to the University of Manchester for this financial support. While studying, I also applied for and was awarded the Widening Participations Fellowship, in which I spent time publicizing classics and theology to school children visiting the university on open days, as well as designing and delivering interactive activities.

Richard Britton
New Mills, United Kingdom
April 2022

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Ab urbe cond.</i>	Livy, <i>Ab urbe condita</i>
A.J.	Josephus, <i>Antiquitates judaicae</i>
ANT	Actor Network Theory
<i>Amat.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Amatorius</i>
<i>Arch.</i>	Vitruvius, <i>De architectura</i>
<i>Ben.</i>	Seneca, <i>De beneficiis</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation
<i>Caus. plant.</i>	Theophrastus, <i>De causis plantarum</i>
<i>Cher.</i>	Philo, <i>De cherubim</i>
CTU	Dietrich, Manfred, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín, eds. <i>The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places</i> . Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1997.
CurTM	<i>Currents in Theology and Mission</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	Seneca, <i>Epistulae morales</i>
<i>Georg.</i>	Vergil, <i>Georgica</i>
<i>Hist. Plant.</i>	Theophrastus, <i>Historia Plantarum</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . With revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1968.
Kil.	Kil'ayim
m	mishnah
<i>Nat.</i>	Pliny, <i>Naturalis historia</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>Op. agr.</i>	Palladius, <i>Opus agriculturae</i>
<i>Orac.</i>	Astrampsychus, <i>Oraculum</i>

- P.Flor. Vitelli, Girolamo. *Papiri greco-egizii, Papiri Fiorentini*. Supplementi Filologico-Storici ai Monumenti Antichi. Milan: Hoepli, 1960.
- P.Mert. 12 Bell, Harold Idris, and Colin H. Roberts, eds. *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Greek Papyri in the Collection of Wilfred Merton*. London: Emery Walker Limited, 1948.
- P.Mich. 8 Youtie, Herbert C., and John G. Winter, eds. *Papyri and Ostraca from Karanis*. Vol. 8 of *Michigan Papyri*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1951.
- P.Oxy. 3 Grenfell, Bernard P., and Arthur S. Hunt, eds. *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*. Part 3. London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1903.
- P.Oxy. 7 Hunt, Arthur S., ed. *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*. Part 7. London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1910.
- P.Oxy. 12 Grenfell, Bernard P., and Arthur S. Hunt, eds. *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*. Part 12. London: The Egypt Exploration Fund, 1916.
- P.Oxy. 42 Peter J. Parsons, ed. *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*. Part 42. London: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1974.
- P.Rein. 18 Reinach, Théodore, Wilhelm Spiegelberg, and Seymour de Ricci. *Papyrus Grecs Et Demotiques Recueillis en Égypte et Publiés*. Milan: Cisalpino-Goliardica, 1972.
- P.Tebt. 1 Grenfell, Bernard P., Arthur S. Hunt, and J. Gilbert Smyly, eds. *Tebtunis Papyri*. London: Oxford University Press, 1902.
- Plant.* Aristotle, *De plantis*
- Pro Phorm.* Demosthenes, *Pro Phormian*
- P.W.* Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*
- Quaest. conv.* Plutarch, *Quaestionum convivialum libri IX*
- Rust.* Columella, *De Re Rustica*; Varro, *De re rustica*
- SemeiaSt Semeia Studies
- TWNT Kittel, Gerhard, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds. *Theologische Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*. 10 vols. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1932–1979.
- WBC Word Biblical Commentary

INTRODUCTION

Can the eternal justice pleased receive
The prayers of those, who ignorant, believe?

—Thomas Chatterton, “The Defence”

A metaphor is a glorious thing,
A diamond ring,
The first day of summer.
A metaphor is a breath of fresh air,
A turn-on,
An aphrodisiac.

—Sparks, “Metaphor”

In this book I argue through Rom 4 and 11 that the believer is not a passive recipient of grace and righteousness from God, one who blindly and ignorantly accepts divine truths and shows this with attentive worship and prayer. Instead, the believer is an interpreter, a reader, and a decision maker who is actively involved in both reciprocal exchange and enhancement of God’s eschatological and soteriological project. At the same time, the believer becomes able to negotiate meaning through their own interaction with texts and traditions in combination with their own personal relationship with the divine and the world. Dispensing with the notion of absolute meaning, the believer becomes empowered to resist the autocracy of those who try to dominate them and mediate on their behalf.

The believer is an *active agent*, meaning that, even though there are forces and authorities outside of their control, they can influence their own destiny and creatively shape their world through their prerogative to interpret and understand. To make this argument, I focus on key texts from Rom 4 and 11 that employ financial, gift, and olive tree metaphors. I examine these in the light of other near-contemporary intertexts—papyri and horticultural manuals—historicizing the deconstruction theory of Jacques Derrida, Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Canguilhem, Giorgio

Agamben, and others. My method does not focus on the *poseur* of literary, political, and philosophical intertexts, such as Seneca, Epictetus, Josephus, Philo, and others, although it does add them into context. Instead, I focus more intensely on the seemingly mundane and neglected texts that have unexplored literary, philosophical, and theological ramifications, such as mortgage deeds, loan agreements, letters between family and friends, and horticultural manuals and notebooks. Such texts are the missives of ordinary people going about their daily business and those writing down practical instructions for increasing production of fruits.

There are real world theological problems of one-directional theology, and to address these we need to indicate the benefits alternative readings can bring. In this book, I hope to show that, in Romans, the believer has power and onus in a relationship with God that is not one-way, but mutual, reciprocal, and creative. At the end of each chapter, I indicate the implications of my deconstruction readings of these Romans passages in conversation with ancient intertexts.

Background

Passive blind faith expectations in worship and faith communities can lead to problems such as intolerance and exclusion and even hate crimes, extremism, and terror. It is at the sites of such issues where biblical studies and theology have an important civic role to play, without becoming subsumed into expectations to justify its own worth in society. Extremism is found within our own churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, our media, online, and even in our own homes. It is found in our wider culture, society, and faith. Violation of the individual's right to understand on their own terms is the most foundational violence that occurs before physical harm is possible. Violating violence is disavowed to the point that we are convinced it does not exist (see Derrida 1978a; 2001a, 148). For instance, if a church assembly begins their service with the assumption that all babies are born in sin or that Christianity is the only truth, then it violates the freedom of the people congregating. It is a silent blow. The most violating aspect of a regime is the repression of freedom to have opinions or to criticize or to form one's own conscience and opinions.

From the perspective of the violation of the individual, I have been thinking more about how biblical studies and theology can impact our lives—both for good and ill—and have been mindful of its potential. We oppress people by how we understand our religion and our religious texts.

In all cases of religious extremism and fundamentalism, the right of the individual to negotiate and determine their beliefs and views are subjugated to ideological preferences that are often lacking in theological dexterity. This narrative of theopolitical oppression is not new but runs from ancient times to the present.

While the Roman multicultural arena offered an impromptu diversity and even formative multiculturalism, it was punctuated by ideological ordering that forcefully separated threatening religions and philosophies from those that conformed. Roman violence distinguished between Jews and Christians (Blanton 2014, 35), although it did so through law first, with the *threat of violence* that permitted and enforced violations in people's freedoms. Without opening a debate on institutionalized violence, it is sufficient to say that just as we see the violence of institutional order in Paul's day, we see the same in the twenty-first century, albeit in different manifestations. Many of the mores, laws, and values we live by include presuppositions that exclude and oppress, and our governments, courts, media, social bodies, and churches are permitted by consensus to enforce these. It is rare in today's Western society that we acknowledge the seeds of fundamentalism, underpinned by veiled threats of violence—not necessarily of the physical kind—that are present. For example, we are trained to identify extremism as being Other and in another place, within an inferior society in the grip of a belated dark age that has yet to reach maturity of enlightenment. In spheres of progressivism, such as the academy and public services, we are expected to set our consciences on autopilot routes of political correctness, which leave little room for the individual to critique. Such disingenuity is comforting and helps us feel superior, but it is unhealthy and leads to harm. The seeds of murder can be found in the oppression of others, no matter how small scale or benign they seem, through the violation of integrity (Derrida 2001b, 112–13). If we, in our church assembly, reject someone because of their homosexuality or others because of their opposition to it, then we have oppressed them by our extremism—as also we do the so-called immoral person to whom we decline a religious marriage, the woman to whom we refuse incardination, or the baby we consider to be full of sin when they died unbaptized.

The idea that the believer is a passive recipient of pure and perfect grace from God and has no meaningful or effective influence is, I think, not only preposterously paradoxical but more significantly a cause, or, at least, a symptom of many deep-rooted problems in religion and society at large. I suggest that extremism, hate, and terror in all faiths result from

this presupposition. However, prescriptive belief does not only negatively affect society at a criminogenic level; it pervades many forms of mainstream worship too: the gay teenager told he is not loved by God, the parents of the epileptic infant told they did not have enough faith, the widow told she did not pray hard enough to cure her husband's cancer, the people who are warned of hell if they do not accept Christ as their savior or Allah as their only god. These are just some examples of the poisonous effects that can be traced back to prescriptive belief—examples that can be seen in contexts of worship that many of us would never think of as extremist.

One major reason these people have been treated this way is because of the way in which we understand religion and religious texts. As a criminal justice practitioner in my day job, I know that extremism results not necessarily from an alien cult that seeks to infest but from the so-called respectable and moral society—our own respectable and moral society—that seeks to control what people think and believe according to a vision of absolute truth. This is what I will call prescriptive belief.

As a literary theologian of sacred texts, I consider that we can trace these problems back to the page and, more widely, how we communicate our faith. When I was an undergraduate, I studied English literature, and one of the first assignments we were given was practical criticism, which is a beautifully useful yet oversimplified form of analysis. This involves taking a text, usually a short poem, and ignoring anything *a priori*, analyzing it based only on what sense it contains—what you observe empirically there and then. This Leavisite approach is radical and distinct from biblical (or other) exegesis because it ignores historical context and, more importantly, evades biographical context, yet like exegesis it involves a dissection of the text—helpful because we are not limited by the perceived author and are focusing on the text. However, a disadvantage of such an approach is that it presupposes a bounty in the text that needs to be extracted, like treasure from a tropical island or ore from a rich mine. The medical paradigm of both practical criticism and exegesis objectify an outcome akin to diagnosis, cure extraction.

Biblical exegesis in one sense is much more diverse than practical criticism because it expects the interpreter to frame the text historically, biographically, linguistically, theologically, and culturally. These aspects are useful for a holistic reading of the text. However, where practical criticism hinges on the present reader's independent view, exegesis denies their vantage point and expects them to approach the text with a set of theological and semiotic presuppositions—mainstream traditional biblical

studies. *Exegesis* in Greek has a meaning prior to that of biblical analysis, of soldiers being led, triumphantly, out of a city, probably with spoils of a concluded war. Thus, emphasis is placed on the leading, with a sense that there is something to be led and taken out and a specified amount and constituency of it (see Dinkler 2019, 74). It may seem problematic that one of our original Western concepts of interpretation includes an analogy of military violence, and some may wish for this to be replaced or altered for better ethical direction. However, as Derrida (2001a, 116) revealed, the distinction between discourse and violence is impossible, and to see language as having an originary innocence infected by a disease or subject to a fall through disruption of interaction is to condemn it with another violence that oppresses dissent through morality conforming to elite powers (see Derrida 1976, 106).

In this metaphor, there is a problem with endless readers making meaning compared with soldiers led out: soldiers can only be led out again once unless they reenter—the text is not empty to one person if someone before reads it. Exegesis implies only one occasion that meaning can be made and be right, and that the reader merely traces this back to its origin. By challenging this view, we can try to see exegesis as an exercise by which we order the soldiers of meaning back into the city, letting them scatter and inhabit places they were not before, then to lead them out in lots of different ways. This would be an exegesis where the reader is an active agent, not a passive one (Dinkler 2019, 77). Despite this, authoritative exegesis continues to exist (Dinkler 2019, 77), and this is often romanticized as nontheoretical and nonideological, making an expectation of analytical purity that is itself ideological (see Philips 1990, 12).

There is much to gain from the traditional practice of exegesis, in which it is expected that any academic writing an essay, minister planning a sermon, or even an individual using the Bible for guidance goes back to the drawing board every time. Just as an anatomy student never takes it for granted the liver looks a certain way, the exegete follows a process of looking at the text as if it were brand new every time and making sense of it on that occasion, rather than only deferring to the interpretations of others. My own analysis in this book borrows from this tradition of exegetic inquiry, as does the planning of my sermons and my own private biblical study. Having said that, there is still, within the concept of traditional exegesis, an expectation of absolute truth to be found and recovered, with each occasion offering the possibility for this bounty or more of it. At the same time, exegesis *always-already* contains within itself its own

deconstruction—what truth is in the text to be brought out is subjective, and the individual situations of the voyeurs of the text fragments any possibility of one absolute truth. It is this approach to truth that I bring into my text-level analysis of the Romans excerpts in this book.

There is no such thing as pure objectivism—or a pure outside view—so we deal with the subjective in any enquiry. This book affirms the role of the believer as an assessor, so the activity, rather than passivity, of faith is presupposed. The activity and power of the believer is located in interpretation. This means that the plasticity of language figures predominantly in our study. So too does the relevance of ambiguity over the idealism of clarity. In these conditions, the role of the believer in negotiating meaning becomes prominent, because there is no such thing as correct wisdom. The act of faith thus establishes the legitimacy of imagination within analysis.

The Approach

There are four dimensions to this study, each of which flows into the other: first, the choice of text; second, the emphasis on faith; third, the use of critical theory; and fourth, the focus on metaphor and language. I therefore begin by explaining why Romans and indeed these texts in chapters 4 and 11 form the basis for our study.

(1) In terms of texts: Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the grand texts of foundational Christian theology on what it means to be a believer, among other important themes. Without this text, there would be no Christian or Christianity with a capital C. Romans is wheeled out, like a reliable family matriarch or as a dutiful bride to the gospels, to be the guarantor of a coherent Christian theology when such coherence is questioned. We assume that any enigmas it may contain can be cracked and that once this happens a stable theology can be drawn from it, like a freshwater well in a desert. Stephen Moore (2019, 119–20) exposes the paradox whereby scholars assume their articles accurately capture the meaning of texts, yet writing an article presupposes the text's insufficiency. Of course, this descends from scholarship's presumption that the texts need to be mediated, although this is further contradicted by the need for continued scholarship, showing the text was not explained well enough in the first exposition.

Whoever masters the text, some assume, can have authority over what it means to understand Christian theology, and this often results in the justification of blind faith—why do you need to understand something

when your superior can do so on your behalf? Ward Blanton (2014, 124) identifies Rom 7, for example, as a “machine” through which one can think out a problem, and I wonder, in the same spirit, if Romans as a whole, indeed every text, is an algorithm through which ideas and experiences can be processed, in which the reader, as much as the author and prior interpreting authorities, intertexts, cotexts, and contexts, provide input, with the output determined by this combination of influences, not the text or author alone in the name of the authority.

Intertexts are also contrasted with Romans, including financial papyri when examining *pistis* and economics in chapter 1, papyri on gift giving in chapter 2’s analysis of gift in Rom 4, and practical agricultural texts in terms of the olive tree allegory in Rom 11, the subject of chapter 3. The reason I choose papyri and horticultural manuals is because I aim to take the Romans texts to *ground level*—looking at the everyday realisms of the time (an approach spearheaded by Peter Oakes in his book *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul’s Letter At Ground Level*, 2009). Whereas Oakes focuses on sociological data available through the excavations at Pompeii, I will use literary analysis of realistic everyday texts to contextualize Romans. By bringing texts to ground using ordinary texts, we can reempower the believer in Paul’s time and then translate this into the power of the believer today.

(2) In terms of faith: In this book, I aim to redirect readers away from traditional ideas of faith and belief toward a faith in which the believer is empowered in their relationship to God through their ability to inquire and create. Faith is situated between the freedoms of interpretation and imagination. Faith is not about blindly accepting a prescribed truth or being passive recipients of meaning. The believing individual is not a vessel in which truth is filled but an ever-flowing cup in which truths are poured in but also spill out plentifully in different forms—the *kenotic* potential of the believer. In order to show this, I focus on *pistis* alongside other financially charged words in Rom 4 in my first chapter, and then I move on to link faith to the expected altruism in Rom 4 in my second chapter. In my third chapter, I widen this to the allegory of the olive tree, which has further ramifications on faith.

(3) In terms of theory: In this study, deconstruction theory is drawn upon strongly, including that of Derrida, Agamben, Canguilhem, and others. Gary Philips (1990, 12) says that “non-theoretical, non-ideological exegesis has never existed, except as a romantic construct, itself an ideological imposition.” Biblical studies is “fighting to retain what the text

‘really means’ so it is important to counter the “closures” of writing or where writing is contained (Strømme 2019, 94, 96). In the interpretation of Romans in this work, certain aspects of the senses of words are seen to be retained and others elided. However, such elision or erosion does not finalize meaning in a text. The idea that words only lose meaning over etymological erosion ignores the role the unconscious plays. Words might lose certain specific aspects of a perceived former sense, but such loss creates a debt of meaning, resulting in an accruing interest if you like, which exerts influence at an unconscious level.

Derrida (1982, 210) explains how *usure* certainly involves “erasure by rubbing, exhaustion, crumbling away,” but it also involves “supplementary product of a capital, the exchange which far from losing the original investment would fructify its initial wealth, would increase its return in the form of revenue, additional interest, linguistic surplus value.” Furthermore, the withdrawal of certain senses of words, or indeed the withdrawal of their metaphoricity through certain intended use, can lead to “an indiscreet and overflowing insistence” and an “over-abundant remanence” elsewhere (Derrida 1978b, 8)—*retrait*. The expected profit of the conceptual and metaphorical detours is arguably the perceived authorial intention or the authorized interpretations that relate to the authorial intention. However, the unexpected surplus, or accrued interest, is not under authorial control and may affect the reader or hearer individually at an unconscious level. It is like a popular fairground game whack-a-mole, where you use a mallet to hit a figure only for another to pop-up elsewhere. This effect, which I call *usure-retrait*, dictates that when certain aspects of a word’s apparent prior senses are elided or held back, they only emerge and increase in another form, unexpectedly, unconsciously, yet in a way in which is significant and conspicuous when it is interpreted using this method.

The elision or erosion of certain senses of words leads to an overspill or springing up elsewhere in different forms. We find suppression of meaning in the way financial words are understood in Rom 4 in chapter 1, the idealism of the gift in chapter 2, and the olive tree allegory in chapter 3. By reading our texts of study alongside ground-level realistic documents rather than elite philosophical or political tracts and using deconstruction techniques, we have a method to appreciate the suppressed aspects of our text. I call this the *usure-retrait method*. My method has formed the basis of my initial exegesis before integration into the analysis in this book.

The notion of *usure* and *retrait* of senses of meaning can be seen through Derrida’s analysis of George Canguilhem’s *La connaissance de la*

vie (1969), which contains the story of how the biological term *cell* first became coined by the English natural philosopher Robert Hooke (1665) when he saw a plant cell under the microscope. Hooke named it cell after the compartment of a beehive that it resembled. Canguilhem poses this question as to whether Hooke's text, in deriving the term cell from the honeycomb chambers, imports other aspects and notions from the context from which it derives:

who knows, whether, in consciously borrowing from the beehive the term cell in order to designate the element of the living organism, the human mind has not also borrowed from the hive, almost unconsciously, the notion of the co-operative work which the honeycomb is the product? (Canguilhem 1969, 49)

Derrida is using Canguilhem's query to open the possibility for the unconscious effects that the metaphoricity of the language have on the reader of Hooke's *Micrographia*. Bees are, according to Derrida (1982, 261), "individuals entirely absorbed by the republic." The suggestion is that the perceived politics and sociology of insects may be carried over into plant biology, the hermeneutical prognosis of which could be ideological and political socialism and communism in future readings.

As Bernard Harrison (1999, 508) summarizes, Derrida is committed that "language trumps intention," in that metaphor, which is language in its entirety, is not controllable by the conscious will of reader or writer and "a speaker cannot, by putting his signature to a text, establish any right to rule out as inadmissible, as inconsonant with his intentions, all but a chosen subset of possible readings; in the end how we understand what we read depends not on the private intentions of the writer but on the potentialities inherent in the public language in which he has chosen to write." As such, metaphor is a feature of the unconscious force of language, and meaning can be generated in texts that the author or speaker did not consciously intend. As Leitch (1983, 254) summarizes, the author is only a guest in his text, and Derrida's work (along with Barthe 1967), "not only de-centers the text, but defers the conclusion" because "a text cannot be located or stopped at the author," whose conclusions on the text "rank in potential value with any other reader's." Any attempt to look only at the conscious use of metaphor (for example, the author meant this to be metaphor but not this) by an author fails to examine the metaphoricity of the language properly and thus fails to understand the meaning properly.

Consequently, in our present study I examine in each chapter how aspects of certain words have unintentional import. So, for instance, the economic sense of *pistis* as financial trust impacts on the dynamics of Rom 4.

(4) In terms of language and specifically metaphor: The area of language where we can see vulnerability when it comes to interpretation is metaphor, so it makes sense to begin our study of belief by concentrating on some texts in Romans accepted to be figurative and others that are not yet have significant metaphorical implications. More importantly, however, from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) to Derrida, we see that metaphor is not just metaphor, but so fundamental to our collective consciousness that it moves our thinking and behaviors. Deconstruction, with its focus on the unconscious, shows that metaphor in the very core of language has implications beyond the obvious and conscious. Metaphors are not trick vaudeville ponies; they do not do philosophy's¹ or theology's will, to make something complicated more conveniently clear, only to be put away when serious discourse occurs. They are not detachable from the philosophical text in that, if they were not present, then meaning through formal concepts would be retained. Instead, metaphors are fundamental to the philosophical text as much as the literary or poetic text. So when the unconscious is evoked, metaphors work outside of conscious intention. Metaphors are transcendent in a collective unconscious. While intention can be affirmed at any point, the significance of metaphors goes beyond that of an author or interpreting authority, such as the church, government, or elites. The metaphorical dimension of language invites the individual to interpret and imagine. So the individual believer is given the power and onus to be faithful by examining metaphor, which exists in the space between the rational and the creative, the intellectual and the emotional.

Faith as Supplement

The metaphysics of presence in objectivity is unraveled and the subjectivity of the individual rehabilitated in philosophy by deconstruction and other paradigm shifting approaches. If faith is by default subjective, then this makes it supplement. It is at once necessary and at the same time sur-

1. *Philosophy* in this sentence refers to the elite academic Western project of insisting upon the separateness between formal discourse and literature.

plus. Economics, which is the focus of two sections of this book, is similarly reliant on the tension between surplus and necessity through finance and currency. For instance, if a person catches twenty fish in a day, which is arbitrary, they will be unable to eat them and may not need so many; however, they may need something else or, more importantly, may need something else in the future. They could sell the fish they are not eating tonight for cash to a restaurant and keep that cash to purchase something else they need. Or they could barter the fish for other items they need. It is their choice of what they do, and the values are based on their own determination and the market. Similarly, faith involves an economic twist in which the believer is in arbitrary reception of signs, and they take them to market, meaning they negotiate as to what these signs are equivalent to. Depending on their life situation, they may exchange the surplus for things relevant to their current situation or negotiate meaning like someone in a bazaar. Such acts involve imagination and a process of valuation in which the sovereignty of capital returns to the people. Truly liberal capital allows the individual to think about how they use and develop their wealth, making way for imagination within limits. Similarly, the protestant spirit of capital in interpretation allows the believer to adhere to the conditions and contexts of interpretation but with the license for imagining.

The economic sense of *pistis* and *fides* has been highlighted for a while and more prominently in recent literature (see Oakes 2018; Morgan 2015). Economics shows itself not to meet the standards of objectivity that many materialists insist on in the physical sciences. Both the abstract as well as the concrete motivate the economic turn, just as with language. Economics asks for the subject to assess; this is never straightforward and definitive but requires intuition, imagination, and insight. The claim for science that there are absolute truths to be ascertained through experimentation, however untrue, is convincing for physical sciences but not for economics or language. For instance, if we use experimentation to determine the properties of carbon, there is a level of consistency of outcome for whoever performs this, wherever they are, in whatever context. However, a loaf of bread may be of more value to an average person in a country with debased currency such as Zimbabwe than gold is to a millionaire in Monaco. It is even more specific than this: if someone really wants to see a rock star at a concert, they may pay huge amounts over the ticket price, whereas someone who does not like that artist might need to be paid to go! The concrete and abstract are not distinguishable in the economy either; using money or items, we can exchange for ideas, rights, secrets, experiences, esteem,

and pleasure. Economy therefore is itself surplus. So is language, and so is belief! The assessment in the economic sense of *pistis* and belief I propose in this work is therefore not clinical or legalistic but wide and open to the imaginative interpretation of the individual believer. Faith is therefore somewhere between interpretation and imagination.

Faith and Intepretation

Scholarship shows that there is no stable translation between *pistis* in the Greek and *fides* in the Latin and any English words such as faith, belief, or trust. Instead, there is a plurality of links between them and therefore a plasticity in the resulting concepts. There are several authors addressing these questions in recent works in innovative ways, but for the purposes of our study, I think it is sufficient and necessary for clarity to focus on *pistis* in our New Testament text as faith interchangeable to some extent with belief but with an emphasis on trust and empowerment of the person giving trust. This is not to dismiss the other manifestations of words translated from Greek or Latin but to showcase one aspect of them in a plethora of such discourse.

At the beginning of 1 Corinthians, Paul sets faith against wisdom in a binary. Paul describes how Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom (1Cor 1:22) and condemns wisdom by stating that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom” (1 Cor 1:25). He claims that Jesus came so that “your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor 2:5). He also warns that wisdom of the present age is in fact foolishness and then recites the catena “He catches the wise in their craftiness” and “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.” It would be deceptive to try and read against Paul’s attitude that wisdom, as an understanding gained from human efforts within a context of mystery, is afflicted by pride and grasping. For Paul, it is the accumulation of knowledge (so you are independent of a need for something external) and the superiority of possessing crafts that together provide the ability to deceive powers and evade divine justice. Nevertheless, here wisdom is not synonymous with intellect or analysis but, in the Jewish and Greek context, with tradition, which (once again) could imply induction and reception rather than active participation. Philosophical thought since Plato tends to presume that an absolute truth is out there to be found, that people can discuss things along the Socratic route as much as they want as an exercise, but that when all is good and done, the truth is the

truth and anything else becomes redundant eventually, like the shed skin of a snake.

Faith, on the other hand, is alive and active to Paul. It is not seen as a static corpus of wisdom tradition but as a dynamic and inexhaustible process. The human can only ever fully understand its human spirit, and only God can ever fully comprehend the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:11). Yet now people have “received not the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God,” with the purpose that we “understand the gifts bestowed on us by God” (1 Cor 2:12). Such understanding involves speaking in “words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit” in order for the “interpreting” of “spiritual things to those who are spiritual.”

While the perpetual deferral of human ability to understand God establishes a limiting process of deference that traps the human in a position of reliance on God, it also retains the possibility to liberate human interpretation from the despotism of an absolute meaning and truth dictated by an authority on behalf of God. Belief is widened to an active interpretive process and exalts the believer to someone who can analyze and put into action the Spirit of God. The binary of text and cosmos breaks down, as does the boundary between them, and so the acts of interpreting and doing, of communication and action, become intertwined. There is consequently no longer any separation between text and material, so the belief of the believer has a determination and an effect somewhere at the point where thought and world, or mental and physical, meet. As Derrida (1976, 158) shows, the location of deconstruction is not outside the text but originates within it. Here we can see a primitive deconstruction movement in Paul’s own use of binary, in which the role of the believer as interpreter emerges.

Paradox lies at the heart of traditional biblical scholarship’s notion of the role of the believer and the eschatological tension. The already-not-yet status is presented as a solution but shows instability that reveals the believer’s agency. N. T. Wright (1991), James Dunn (1988a; 1988b; 2006; 2009), and Andrew Lincoln (1981), for instance, on this matter presuppose the passivity of the believer but at the same time expect their agency. This is more prominent in Oscar Cullmann (1951), who perhaps emphasizes agency more keenly. Cosmic dimensions to the eschatological tension can be found that show such contingency, in which the apostles continue to “drive back the still constantly active power of conquered death” (Cullmann 1951, 237) and “triumph is not yet final” and believers participate in the “cosmic drama” and “heavenly direction” (Lincoln 1981, 187, 192).

Perhaps this view draws on the plasticity of Hellenistic religion, in which the power of Zeus has limits and agency lies with both gods and mortals (Albinus 2000, 64).

Such ambivalence runs throughout the theological establishment. For Cullmann, it is wrong for what he calls “primitive” Christianity, by which he means early Christianity, to consider the “interest for the individual man” [sic] as being “at the most, only on the margin” of redemptive history. Instead, the individual human is “built into” Christianity’s historical structure, “actively sharing in the redemptive history” (Cullmann 1951, 217). There is no “general ethical rule” (230) for how the Jewish law is to be obeyed or applied, and Christ’s message was that “fulfilment of the law” is “not literal” but requires “radical application” of it to “concrete situations” (226), thus necessitating the Christ-following believer to make “ethical judgements”—“the demand of the believer to recognise ever anew at each moment the commandment that the situation at each time presents” (225). The believer is thus positioned in a responsible and powerful role.

These margins of freedom are evidenced by the history of belief where fundamental tenets are always-already at stake, and “what the Christian believes today about God, life after death, the universe” and so on “is not what he believed a millennium ago—nor is the way he responds to ignorance, pain, and injustice the same as it was then” (Asad 1993, 46). For example, the early-modern valorization of pain as participating in Christ’s suffering is at odds with the modern Catholic perception of “pain as an evil to be fought against and overcome as Christ the Healer did” (46).

Despite this changeability, Wright (1995) allegorizes biblical texts as architectures that protect the authority of God, using house metaphors. Derrida’s *Truth in Painting* (1987) exposes such a tendency in metaphysics. Wright’s house metaphor is an example of conservative biblical scholarship’s need to organize, frame, and control interpretation of Paul. On the dissonance between structural certainty and frailty of authoritative Pauline meaning, Blanton (2007, 107) comments how Heidegger sometimes “participates with the most popular biblical critics in their use of specific techniques that promise to conjure the authentic Paul from the many ancient and modern dissimulators, misinterpreters, and traitors of the religious experience for which he has come to stand.” However, “by the same token, and as we might have expected by now, Heidegger also contests the propriety, which is to say the property rights, of the biblical critics in relation to the Pauline heritage itself” (107). In other words, the house

of meaning can be altered, extended, reduced, adapted, or refurbished. It can also be knocked down and rebuilt.

By challenging the exclusivity and authority over meaning, we can redistribute the rights to interpret the text back to the individual and the believer. The paradox is summarized effectively by Paul S. Fiddes (2000, 23): “there has to be a certainty about the overcoming of evil and the triumph of God’s purposes, but the freedom of God and the freedom of human beings to contribute to God’s project in creation also demands an openness in the future.” Within this framework, belief is not about blind acceptance of theological regulations but an organic process of fresh interpretation in which the believer is tasked with forming meaning unregulated and unfettered by the metaphysical authorities that have formed within and outside the texts and traditions and that pass themselves off as natural (or even divine or true/truth). The individual believer has as many property rights over the text as the perceived author and the accepted regulators of their interpretation.

Power and Understanding

Powers in one form or another have always been preoccupied with securing public authority from the risk of the individual engaging in public expressions of personal belief. Clifford Geertz (1973, 109) explains that “religious belief always involves the prior acceptance of authority.” Amidst the network of metaphysical myths of the West is the transference of truth from the ultimate sovereign that is God, to the believer, via the ordained political powers and principalities in the world, who control and delimit the misunderstanding of the message, which paradoxically is incorruptible yet must be protected from corruption. No challenges or complex expectations are made of the subjects apart from passive and simple reception and acceptance of this message. Margins and discrepancies are denied or mitigated. This process is enforced as being one-directional, an oppressively over-simplistic dictation from the sovereign to the subject, which is further conflated with pure grace and gift as part of its condescension, in which meaning is nonnegotiable and the believer is expected to accept blindly, never question, and then respond only on that limited basis.

Unequal binaries lie at the heart of these authority structures (see Derrida 1976), exposing how people are labelled, controlled, and excluded: white/black, male/female, rich/poor, heterosexual/homosexual, beautiful/ugly, good/evil, sacred/profane, spiritual/material, teacher/student,

author/reader, priest/worshiper, among many others. The master binary is the metaphysics of presence—the exaltation of presence over absence, being over nonbeing, Being (existence) over non-Being (nonexistence) (see Culler 1983, 92). Further to this, in terms of interpretation we have *logocentrism*, in which philosophy prioritizes speech over writing due to the former's spontaneity and presence of the authorized speaker and the latter's apparent delay and absence of someone to control how it is understood (90). Generic active/passive binaries are significant because the privileged factor is active and the other is passive. The privileged actives retain the right to create, decide, instruct, design, and explain, and passives are invested with lesser roles—to follow, respond, and obey.

Another binary is literal/metaphorical, in which the former is real meaning and the latter a provisional one (Morris 2000, 227), suitable for elaboration of the serious but not a permanent substitution (Derrida 1982). It is as if metaphor is the protracted voyage of Ulysses, returning with argosies of real meaning (Harrison 1999, 513). Another metaphor of metaphor is currency—the coin is acceptable in transactions if necessary, but it must be honored with the wealth it represents (see Saussure 1959, 115; Derrida 1982, 218). Despite attempts to mitigate the discrepancies between proper and figurative meaning, it becomes apparent that philosophy's core concepts are themselves metaphorical—*theoria*, *eidos*, *logos* (Derrida 1982, 224). For instance, *theoria* has a literal meaning “to see.” This means metaphor is inescapable, even in the scientific text, and so is ambiguity. The interpreter is therefore empowered to make meaning from the text. Stephen D. Moore (1994) shows this in his rereading of John 4:7–15, in which the boundaries between the literal and the metaphorical are challenged, and the Samaritan woman is positioned as an active interpreter who teaches Christ about the instability of a distinction between living and spiritual waters, with the theological outcome that no one person is the source and every believer has their own agency.

The idea that religions and their texts are to be interpreted, decoded, or translated has met with challenge by some, railing against the textualist attitude. Manuel Vasquez (2011, 228) argues that “the religion scholar caught in the textualist attitude acts as the authorised interpreter of texts and the endless discourses on them, or of the deepest feelings and beliefs of the faithful.” He also describes how Geertz and others see religion as needing to be decoded prior to it being able to be “related to its structural conditions” (244). The interpretation of religion is vulnerable, through the decoding mindset, to being disproportionately influenced by what-

ever powers are dominant at a specific time and place. A takeaway from Vasquez's critique of text-centric interpretation is that tradition must be made far more prominent in our understanding of biblical texts. One of the approaches of this book is to avoid deferring to the elite literary and philosophical discourse and to look at ancient texts at ground level (as per Oakes), such as papyri and horticultural practical manuals. These texts reflect tradition that is wider than the literary-philosophical discourse but that also show the poetic in the mundane.

My Arguments and the Texts

1. Romans 4:4–6 and 4:23–25

In chapter 1, I focus on Rom 4:4–6 and 4:23–25 and argue that *pisteuō* and *pistis* (and indirectly *logizomai*, *dikaiosunē*, *dikaiō*, and *dikaiōsis*) in Rom 4:3–5 and 4:22–24 have for a long time been interpreted to confirm one-way direction of power and onus from God to the believer. I use ordinary papyri near contemporaneous to Romans to contextualize this.

In this chapter, I flag up certain problems of one-way directional readings. The believer has been placed as a passive recipient of God's grace who has no determination or power. I argue this leads not to righteousness, nor a benign erroneous devotion, but to problems such as extremism. Disingenuity of the division and delay in belief through the rejection of payment in the economic paradigm compounds into perpetual deferral to authority. *Pistis* as blind faith rather than trust is myopic and leads to fundamentalism and extremism. The rejection of agency in the economic paradigm denies the freedom of the individual believer and allows for collective oppression. When transcendence of debt is presented as emancipating, it allows for perpetual obligation rather than liberation—owing and being owed permits accountability of all parties. One-directional views repress any questioning of authority by the believer and deny them their power and onus to affect change. At the end of the chapter, I signal some implications of my deconstruction readings and how they can enhance discourse, such as the affirmation of the active role of the individual to prevent extremism, the rejection of perpetual deferral to corrupt religious authorities that uphold the myth of perfection at the expense of the individual believer, the rejection of the blind-faith position of mainstream fundamentalism, the allowance of critique and agency of the individual to determine meaning, and the increase in accountability, which allows them to challenge authority.

To pursue these problems, in this chapter I review economic metaphor using deconstruction and the literary context of seemingly mundane financial papyri. I analyze this papyri to appreciate the equality of actors in financial transactions so that the role of the believer is reframed as active and the relationship between God and the believer is reciprocal. It is assumed in scholarship that in finance as in this Romans text, the one accounting holds the power and onus whereas the one believing, or trusting, lacks them. However, our papyri show roughly contemporary examples in financial scenarios where the one trusting can make decisions and has power.

2. Romans 4:4–6, Focusing on Gift and Grace

In chapter 2, I focus specifically on gift and grace in Rom 4:4–5. I challenge scholars' easy acceptance that ancient altruistic gift-giving in the form of Seneca affirms the grace of God, and I use ancient papyri texts to propose that such grace is an effect of material subjection rather than a theological or ethical absolute.

In this chapter, I identify some problems with the paradigm of altruistic gift as grace in Romans. I propose that the altruistic gift disavows a perpetual debt that is unresolvable and renders the recipient in perpetual debt to the giver while concurrently denying this obligation so it cannot be accounted for. I show that the presupposition of the forced gift denies self-empowerment of the individual that translates into prescribed theology. I show that altruism relies on austerity to foster a culture of dependence and dismissal of personal thrift, which represents the removal of agency of the individual believer to interpret. Furthermore, I propose that the framing of the economic essential as luxury through altruism denies the believer the right to determine what theological propositions are essential to them and prevents them from having freedom of interpretation and expression through the *jouissance* of supplement. At the end of the chapter, I signal some implications of my deconstruction readings and how they can enhance discourse in terms of the benefits of exchange between unequal parties of learning and faith, the empowerment of self-education and enlightenment over prescribed theology, and the reliance on self over others to interpret and create meaning.

To pursue these problems in this chapter, I demonstrate that affirming gift as grace transposes economic oppression into the theological field. I further argue that attempts to distinguish the material and spiritual in

the gift as grace are undermined by the practical challenges of apostolic mission exemplified by Paul in Romans. Using ancient papyri again, I propose that an acceptance of the economic gift as grace enhances the gospel and empowers those commissioned to spread it. In P.Oxy. 12.1481, Theonas tries to convince his mother Tetheus that he is not ill nor in need. He acknowledges presents sent through her from others and hopes she is not obliged or burdened by this. In P.Oxy. 42.3057 Ammonius tried to underplay several gifts and the letter sent to him, yet at the same time infers obligation and inability to pay back such gifts. In P.Mert. 12, Chairas affirms the importance of friendship to ward off obligation, highlights his thrift, and indicates a need for resolution to attempted altruism. From this analysis, I show that pretending altruistic gift affirms God's grace collaborates with the oppression that denies the individual economic autonomy through perpetual, unresolvable debt. I explain that such analogues refuse the theological autonomy of the believer, with meaning deferred, but rather than being open, it is infinitely absolute and settled. I suggest that being realistic about gift as a delayed form of economy in opposition to the altruistic gift is indicative of the relationship between God and the believer, which is eternally deferred yet open and constantly changeable.

3. Olive Tree Grafting Allegory in Romans 11:17–23

In chapter 3, I focus on the grand olive-tree grafting allegory in Rom 11:17–23, using ancient horticultural texts to contextualize this. In this chapter, I identify some problems with one-way benefit in this grafting paradigm in Rom 11. The first issue is how the allegory has been used to justify the superiority of certain religious creeds and doctrines over others, especially converts into Messianic Judaism or Christianity. The second issue I raise is how the prominence of the tree has been used to affirm the need for a righteous corporate whole, with the graft used to show that an individual incorporated is inferior or merely representative of a superior source, rendering the individual as unimportant. The third is how the tree grafting allegory is used to justify exclusion and selective inclusion of individuals to an oppressive fascistic pattern. Any difference or variation introduced by the individual is rejected, resulting in a replication of ideas and belief that prevents creativity and development. At the end of the chapter, I indicate some implications of my deconstruction readings, how they can enhance discourse to promote equality, the role of the individual believer, and wider inclusivity.

I reject the prominent view that this text merely inverts Theophrastus of Eresius's instructions on grafting branches of cultivated olive trees onto wild ones—in that wild branches are instead grafted onto cultivated trees—to portray the gentile believers to be either wanting or in need of reproach. I also reject that this allegory portrays the gentile believers as morally rejuvenating Israel. Furthermore, I question the view that it is primarily based on practices explained in texts by Roman writers Columella and Palladius, in which shoots from wild olive trees are indeed grafted onto cultivated ones to revive and refresh the latter, thus advancing this argument for the gentile believers rejuvenating Israel. This chapter finds that the allegory and metaphor of the olive tree and the grafting process shows the wider dimensions of mutual exchange over hierarchical directive. The tree can encapsulate ideas of change and evolution, as well as difference and contestation; to show this, I use ancient horticultural intertexts of Theophrastus, Columella, and Palladius and even a prescient text from the Book of Mormon, alongside pieces of other ancient grafting texts and Derrida's (1969) own metaphor of the graft as writing, to emphasize mutuality. Implicit in these ancient texts is a sense of exchange, albeit asymmetric, rather than one-directional benefit from tree to graft or graft to tree. The graft is an artificial intervention into nature. However, at the same time, we can see that any intention of grafting is undermined by the intertext of the wider exchanges of nature. Equally, the purity of nature is undermined by the subject's glance, their attempt to interpret the world around them. The exchange between subject and object is ever evolving and fluid.