

Reading Galatians and Empire at the Great Altar of Pergamon¹

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In memory of Dieter Georgi (1929-2005)

The Great Altar of Pergamon, erected around 170 B.C.E. by the Attalid dynasty, is a monument of breathtaking beauty. No visitor can escape its magic. It is also the monument of a dominant world order—and of a primeval world war. In manifold combat scenes of supreme artistic perfection the gods and goddesses of the Great Frieze are shown in battle against the Giants attacking from below. The deities above fight vigorously but in a composed manner, clearly victorious and in control. Their opponents, on the other hand, appear in all poses and stages of dying and dead as they are impaled, mauled, hacked and trampled down by the divine force. The hair of the defeated Giants is wild, their bodies are naked, rage and despair show in their faces. Lacking calmness, restraint and all the other features that mark their conquerors as superior and civi-

1. This article outlines a larger book project on re-reading Galatians in the context of the Roman empire, most notably the Roman province of Galatia and the Great Altar of Pergamon. In order to give an overall idea of the argument within the spatial limitations required by this volume I had to mostly refrain from including footnotes and pretty much left the style of the original oral conference presentation. It goes without saying how much my work on Galatians owes to all those who have explored and exposed the much repressed conflict between Paul and empire in recent years, thus opening this most vital debate in current New Testament scholarship: Richard Horsley and all those gathered in his edited volumes *Paul and Empire*, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, and *Paul and Politics*; to Luise Schottroff, John Dominic Crossan, Klaus Wengst, and Jakob Taubes; and, among “classic” forerunners, Friedrich Nietzsche, Adolf Deissmann, and Sir William M. Ramsay.

In addition, I especially thank Anne Hale Johnson, Chairwoman (emerita) of the Board of Directors of Union Theological Seminary, who in 1997 together with Dieter Georgi not only urged me to move from Berlin to New York but also has been very interested in and supportive of my work on Paul since then—including providing class passes to the Metropolitan Museum of Art “in exchange” for the loss of the Pergamon Museum.

lized, some of them are even depicted as half-beastly with nasty snake legs. We cannot miss the point that the battle unfolding before our eyes is the holy war of civilization protecting itself against barbarism. The order of the world and the whole cosmos is at stake. Law is opposed by lawlessness, culture by savages, and it is sacred violence that defends boundary against transgression. With this, the Great Altar presents itself as a core monument of Western civilization (See selected images of the Great Altar in Plates A-D).

Why Should We Read Paul's Letter to the Galatians at the Great Altar of Pergamon?

Throughout the years of the Cold War the Great Altar belonged to East Berlin. Since its rediscovery in 1878, it had been intimately linked to the imperial rise of Germany. At the end of World War II, out of the ruins of Berlin and a fallen empire, the Russians took it to Leningrad/St. Petersburg in 1945. Towards the end of the 1950s it was returned in a generous gesture to East Germany, which by then had become the westernmost outpost of the Soviet empire. On an island in the heart of the divided city, not far from the Berlin wall and right across from the Divinity School of Humboldt University, the Pergamon Museum housed the Great Altar. And there we would go, a few students and a teacher of New Testament, and contemplate the ancient contexts of war and peace, order and subversion, empire and counter-empire, reading the Bible alongside Peter Weiss' *Aesthetics of Resistance*. This is where my journey with Galatians started. And I still remember vividly how we stood at the Great Altar together with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza shortly after the Berlin wall fell, debating liberation and biblical interpretation at the threshold of the new post-1989 world order, trying to make sense of the surprisingly numerous triumphant goddesses of the Great Frieze. What I present here is thus in many ways an ongoing conversation "across the empires."

Something has haunted me all this time—and more than ever since the events of September 11, 2001: Isn't Paul, in his own way, mirroring the imagery of the Great Altar? Isn't he rightly blamed as an early protagonist of Western imperial order with its countless, multiform wars it has imposed on humanity? We know his harshly bipolar rhetoric of justification by faith versus works, grace against law, foreskin versus circumcision: especially in the letter to the Galatians, which right away starts with an *Anathema* directed against his opponents (Gal 1:8-9). There is no doubt that this dichotomic structure became a building block for the occidental

construct of the “Other.” Is Paul thus, in the making of the Western mind, one of the great turning points where the war of the Gods against the Giants became a Christian battle—with crusades, conquests, and witch hunts to follow. The Holocaust. And two world wars waged under “god-with-us,” a battle that we are still and again fighting.

Looking at the troublesome role that Paul and the Galatians have played throughout the history of Christian occidental interpretation, I was wondering what actually these two, Paul and the Galatians, were wrestling with in their *own* world and at a time when the empire and imperial religion were not yet Christian. This sent me on a journey to ancient Galatia which became much more eventful than I had anticipated.

What is the Historical Context of Ancient Galatia(ns)?

This somewhat modest question almost immediately plunges us into a major scholarly dilemma. *There is no context.* The letter to the Galatians seems to be much more at home in Martin Luther’s Wittenberg than in Paul’s Galatia. Over time it has acquired plenty of “surrogate” contexts. But at least within the theological guild its original context is almost completely *terra incognita*, unknown land, more than with any other Pauline letter. Have you ever wondered what a Galatian looked like and whether she had to wrestle with anything else than “grace or law”? Probably not. We think dogmatics, not actual people and real-life issues when we hear Galatians. Faith and works, not grain and crops. Where the Galatians live, in this far-above realm of universal Christian truths, there are no tax demands, no conscriptions, no public punishments, no slave markets, no political conflicts to negotiate. *There is no Roman empire.* It simply does not exist in the dogmatic province of Galatia governed by Christian theologians.

At least we have learned to re-contextualize Galatians in its *Jewish* framework. Krister Stendahl, for example, has made us aware of the Jewish-Gentile polarity around Paul. This was a major achievement. Yet the debate was still much confined to purely theological matters. How Jewish law and Jewish-Gentile table community relate to the overarching demands of *Roman* law and order remained mostly unexplored.

And then there was this almost ritual debate about “North or South” that kept whole generations of exegetes busy for no good reason and without any result: Did Paul’s addressees live in cities like Iconium, Lystra, Derbe in the South of Galatia—or farther North in tribal Galatian territories around Tavium, Pessinus, Ancyra? We don’t know. But do we need to know? All these cities are part of the Roman province of Galatia, which

was founded in 25 B.C.E. by Caesar Augustus after the last Galatian king had been killed when he tried to subdue the rebellious mountain tribe of the Homonadeis. (A relevant aside: King Amyntas was a close ally of Rome and his war was later successfully completed by a certain Publius Sulpicius Quirinius whom we know from the Christmas story in Luke 2 as governor of the Roman province of Syria...cf. Strabo, *Geog.* 12.6.5) What we need for Galatians is a new “provincial hypothesis” that takes the social and political context of the Roman province of Galatia as a whole seriously. We have to talk about South and North. We also have to talk about East *and* West.

But What has the Great Altar To Do with the Roman Context of Galatians?

We are *not* presupposing that Paul wrote Galatians at Pergamon—or even that he knew the Great Altar. But the Great Altar can assist us in re-contextualizing the letter to the Galatians in two ways. As an “auxiliary context” it may help re-imagine both the “historical Galatians” (1) and their (and Paul’s) world that was ordered predominantly by Roman rule and religion (2).

(1) *The historical Galatians*: The Great Altar is the most distinguished monument of Galatian history—not only in Asia Minor but all throughout the Greco-Roman world. If we take a guided tour through the Pergamon Museum today, we will probably hear that the historical background of the altar is a series of successful military operations of the Attalid dynasty of Pergamon directed against “marauding Gauls” towards the end of the third century B.C.E. In the battle scenes of the Great Altar, these historical Gauls became transformed into mythological “Giants” in order to celebrate the archetypal and universal dimension of Pergamon’s victory over them. These are “our” Galatians. “Marauding Gauls” is a common name for them at this time. And, they are perceived as universal enemies and an almost cosmic security risk.

To understand this we have to keep in mind that the Greek word for “Galatians” (*Galatai*) covers Gauls and Celts in general. These omnipresent “northern barbarians” (to whom we owe Halloween, among other things) were living all over Europe in Germany, France, Spain, Britain, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, at the Black Sea and as far as east as Turkey. They had been troubling the Greco-Roman world for centuries both in the East and West: In 387 B.C.E. “Galatians” had stigmatized themselves forever by conquering and burning Rome (Livy 5.34-48). Although the holy geese saved the capitol, Rome claimed to be permanently traumatized. 100 years

later, in 279 B.C.E., other savage tribes of “Galatians” attacked (unsuccessfully) the Greek sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, the navel of the world. Another century passed and again a major clash with Rome happened, this time in Asia Minor where three Galatian tribes had settled after Delphi. In 189 B.C.E. the Roman general Manlius Vulso, in a “pre-emptive” and highly disputed military action, massacred or enslaved 40,000 Galatians, quoting them (according to Livy) to be the notorious enemies of Rome all over the world and a permanent threat to Roman interests in Asia Minor, even if they had not taken up arms against Rome at this point (Livy 38.12-39.7).

These are again “our” Galatians. And all of this belongs to the history behind the Great Altar that was erected two decades after Manlius Vulso. The Great Altar thus immerses us into a collective memory where the Galatians are firmly linked to the history of Pergamon, Rome and the Greco-Roman world in general. They are seen, at least from the dominant perspective, as “universal barbarians,” a sort of “ancient terrorists” operating on a global scale—and they unite the Greco-Roman world not only in common fear of *terror et tumultus* (favorite words used by ancient writers to describe Galatians/Gauls/Celts), but also in gratitude for any victory won over them. The final victory over Galatia/Gaul, however, the ultimate taming of the Celtic savages was achieved by Rome, both in the East and the West. This brings me to my second point.

(2) *A Roman reading of the Great Altar*: Whatever the original message was the Attalids of Pergamon wanted to convey with the Great Altar, it very soon became the quintessential monument of the emerging Roman world order—and of a new type of imperial world religion that was born out of a “sacred” victory over the enemy Other. Set in beautiful marble, the more than 120 overlife-sized sculptures, the two friezes, and the overall spatial arrangement of the Great Altar embody the basic symbolic order of cosmos versus chaos, law versus anarchy, appropriate religion versus blasphemy. This order corresponds to the “inside” and “upside” of city/civilization and law that needs to be defended and protected against the “other” of lawless barbarism and “terrorism” from outside and below.

If we try to depict this spatial semiotics of the Great Altar by employing the so-called “semiotic square” as a methodological tool, we can depict a structure shaped by strongly bi-polar oppositions between A and non-A, B and non-B, as well as between A and non-B, and B and non-A (Figure 1).

The inside and upside (A) in this arrangement represents the positive values of city, civilization, law, order, proper religion (B), whereas the counter-positions of lawlessness, barbarism, chaos, blasphemy and other-

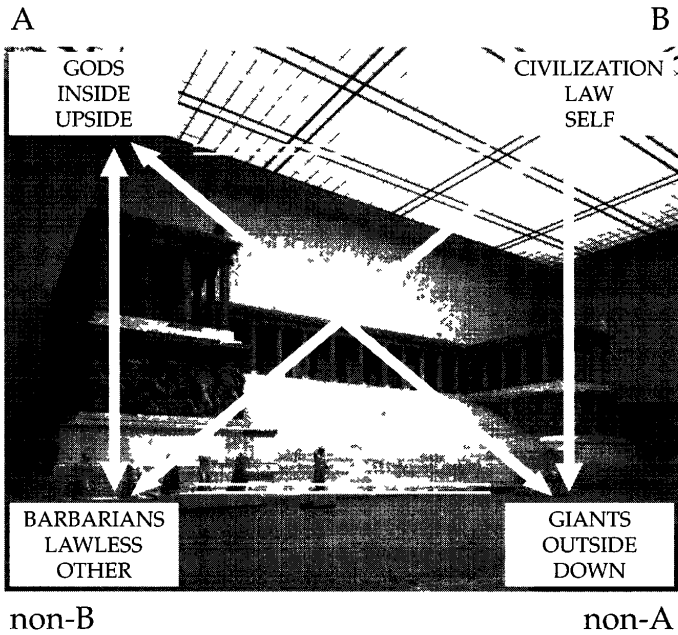


Figure 1.

ness (non-B) are linked to the opposite location of outside and underside (non-A): the very location from where the Giants try to attack the deities who protect the above and inside against the lawless assault from below.² This perfectly matches the Roman concept of cosmic law, world order and imperial world religion.

The Romans legally “inherited” the Altar together with the whole kingdom of Pergamon. It was bequeathed to them by the last Attalid ruler in 133 B.C.E. and subsequently turned into the Roman province of Asia, with Pergamon as its capital. With a temple to Roma and Augustus built in 29 B.C.E., Pergamon became one of the first centers of the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor. Although we are lacking precise information on the Great Altar in this context, it is to be expected that it played a prominent role within the framework of imperial religion. Adela Yarbro Collins, for example, believes that the Great Altar is linked to the “dwelling place” and “throne” of Satan/Zeus/emperor located at Pergamon according to Revelation 2:12-16.³

² The graph of Figures 1-5 is a modified version of the semiotic square in its original Greimasian (and Aristotelian) shape. On the one hand, it applies textual semiotics to spatial semiotics and iconology. On the other hand, it places the two inclusive relations (A and B,

The Great Altar not only presents focal religious insignia of Roman power in the right manner and place: The eagle and the Capitoline trinity of Zeus/Jupiter, Hera/Juno, Athena/Minerva are at the center (see Plates B and C). Close to them are Nike/Victory, Hercules the divine son and man, Ares/Mars and Aphrodite/Venus as the divine ancestors of the Julio-Claudian dynasty (see Plate D), as well as Apollo as Augustus' divine father and patron. The altar also shows how cosmic and elemental forces of night and day, sea and land are in holy combat against evil, and how the royal city is emerging out of this fight as a beacon of civilization. All of these are images taken up by the Roman ideology. At Paul's time the Great Altar thus in a unique way co-represents how Roman order and the city of Rome herself are permanently re-established by pushing back against the chaos of the "barbarians" outside and inside. It also reveals a lot about the order and the process of "ordering" imposed on a Roman province like Asia or Galatia—or any other province. The Great Altar, therefore, may help us re-contextualize Paul's letter to the Galatians in their native world that was defined not solely by Jewish but much more by Roman law and order.

This has substantial implications for how we read the letter. We will enter into our textual inquiry with one of the most "perpetual" questions of Pauline interpretation:

Did Paul Have a Horse?

Let us think for a few moments about Damascus, the city where Paul was turned inside out, upside down and started to become the human that 20 years later wrote Galatians. What actually happens to him on the road to Damascus? Every year, 50 percent of the incoming class at Union is sure that they know exactly what happened: he fell from his horse. The horse is not in the text, neither in Galatians nor in Acts, but my zeal in repeating this has weakened over time because the horse indeed very nicely fits into the story. In the world of ancient images horses are quite common. They are attributes of royal victory, power and glory. On Roman soldiers'

non-A and non-B) on the horizontal, rather than the vertical, level. This way the hierarchical relations between the four terms are emphasized and expressed in an order that renders the structure of the altar and the socio-spatial codes of our culture more adequately: The privileged "good" side (A and B) thereby appears on top, the non-privileged negative side of non-A and non-B at the bottom. For an introduction to Greimas' structural semiotics see Daniel Patte, *The Religious Dimensions of Biblical Texts* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1990).

3. Adela Yarbro Collins, "Pergamon in Early Christian Literature," in *Pergamon: Citadel of the Gods* (ed. Helmut Koester; Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998), 163-84, 172; see also Holger Schwarzer, "Herrscherkult in Pergamon," *IstMitt* 49 (1999), 249-300, 294ff.

tombs one may see a triumphant rider, his horse trampling down a defeated enemy. On the famous Jupiter-giant columns in Germany and Gaul the divine father is depicted high on a powerful horse, pushing down a crushed giant—a strong symbol of imperial colonization. At Pergamon several horses appear on the side of the triumphant deities at the Great Frieze, participating in the imperial battle against chaos, blasphemy and disorder, shielding the sacred inside of the city/civilization against the outside below.

Paul too, as we know from Galatians and Acts, came to Damascus as a sort of holy warrior. His battle, as he perceived it, was against Jewish heretics and “liberals”:

You have heard how I once practiced my Jewishness. I was ahead of everybody in persecuting the assembly of God and made havoc of it. I was at the forefront of Judaism, outstripping many contemporaries of my nation, as I was zealous to the extreme for the traditions of my forefathers...(Gal 1:13-14).

Pre-Damascus Paul

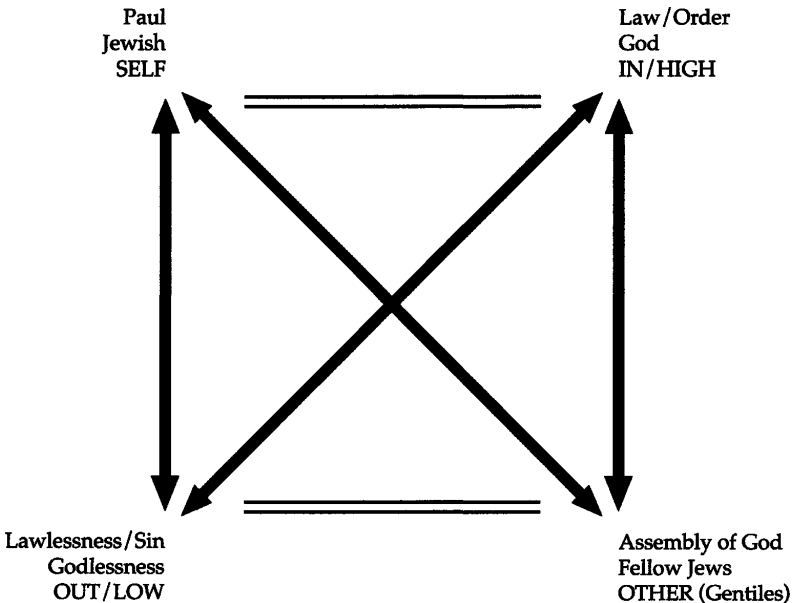


Figure 2.

Paul definitely was on a high horse. Deviance, transgression, lack of appropriate zeal and belief—this is what he apparently saw everywhere among the Jews, and particularly among the Jesus movement. For him this was all about law and order. Proper Jewishness was undermined through the presence of the sinful Other that was creeping into the inside of Israel's body with snake-legs from the outside. Serpents' heads like those depicted in the Great Frieze were threatening the supreme rule of temple, law and God from below: the very identity of a Jewish SELF defined over and against the godless OTHER of the Gentiles and their idols.

If we take up the hermeneutical tool we used already in our analysis of the positions and counter-positions at the Great Altar, the shape of a semiotic square as shown in Figure 2 emerges.

This is how the world is ordered for the pre-Damascus Paul. It is a battlefield. His Jewish identity and SELF (A) are defined by LAW and GOD (B). They are like a fortress under attack, an IN group space HIGH above everybody else, including not only the "assembly (*ekklesia*) of God" but many of Paul's fellow Jews. He has to defend it against the inferior OTHER (non-A) that doesn't belong IN but needs to be pushed away, OUT and DOWN, as it represents GODLESS LAWLESSNESS, i.e. non-Israel and the GENTILES (non-B). Paul, as we have heard, uses violent "battle" language to describe the war he was waging—he was a militant.

If we step out of our carefully "boxed" and compartmentalized theological discourse for a moment and go to the Great Altar of Pergamon, trying to understand Paul's pre-Damascus agenda within the wider context of his time, we make a surprising discovery. The two diagrams (Figures 1 and 2) depicting the semiotic square of the gigantomachy at Pergamon and of Paul's battle within Judaism have a strikingly similar structure. Seen against the backdrop of the Great Frieze all of Paul's struggle fits strangely and disturbingly well into the conceptual world of the Greco-Roman giant battle with its basic polarities of LAW and ORDER (B) versus CHAOS and LAWLESSNESS (non-B), and with a superior SELF-INSIDE (A) versus an inferior OTHER-OUTSIDE (non-A). The "zeal" of the pre-Damascus Paul and of the Pergamene deities share a similar symbolic universe. Did the God of Israel basically fight the same fight as the gods and goddesses of the Great Altar?

Of course this God was imageless and therefore missing from the pantheon of the Great Frieze. Of course this was the ONE God different from the idols. Within the ancient world the Jewish God was difficult to integrate and also had a shameful track record of trouble-making. But if we look at the pre-Damascus Paul: how he zealously fights for the law and the traditions of "his" (he says "my"—Gal 1:14) fathers, how he wages a

holy war with God at his side, how he tries to destroy the lawless Other without mercy—it seems like a replica of the battle fought by the gods against the Giants. It has a different color but essentially the same structure. JEWS versus GENTILES can be seen as equivalent to GREEKS versus BARBARIANS/GIANTS. In both cases a dominant SELF upholding law and order stands against an OTHER defined as hostile to order and law. That means that the biblical God, in a way, despite his absence *was* there at the Great Frieze as well, God among the Gods within the framework of a law-based order. As a “lawful” God the God of Paul’s zeal was *ultimately* sustaining the supreme law-giving authority of God Jupiter/Zeus, or, more concretely, the world order established and maintained on behalf of the Gods by their “divine son” (*divi filius*) Caesar (Figure 3).

Jewish and Roman Law

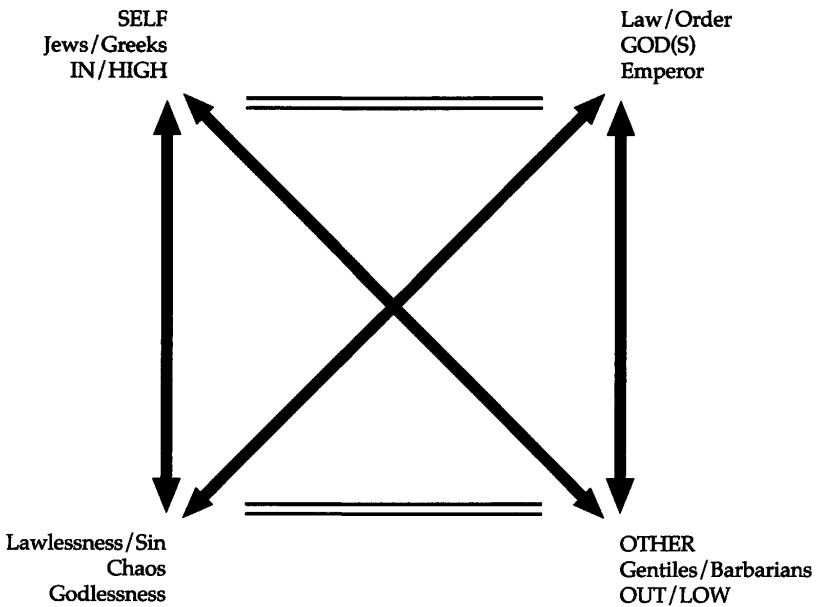


Figure 3.

Despite all the problems Jewish monotheism and Jewish law created in terms of integration, there was a basic commensurability of a hierarchical order of law-based IN-OUT / SELF-OTHER dichotomies that could be perceived as the “common measure” that made Jewish law acceptable and the Jews themselves “manageable” within the Greco-Roman imperial

world. Maybe this is easier to understand from a post-Damascus perspective. When Paul, after his revelation of God's son all of a sudden declared that Gentile foreskin was as good as Jewish circumcision, this breach of Jewish law made his communities highly suspicious and entirely "unmanageable" within the constraints of the law-based common order. The images of the Great Frieze, representing precisely this common universal law, communicate with great clarity how deadly an offense against the cosmic order it is to transgress or blur the sacred boundary between IN and OUT, HIGH and LOW, "us" and "them." This transgression and blurring of boundaries is the offense of the Giants and the reason why they needed to be punished by the divine. Paul before Damascus in a particular way took part in this "divine campaign" of upholding the sacred boundaries. Not only Jewish identity but also the Roman imperial world order rested on these vital demarcation lines.

This leads to a hermeneutical insight that fundamentally challenges and changes the paradigm for reading Paul: all that is said about "law" in Galatians is not restricted to Jewish law but has a wider significance within the framework of Roman law as well. If Paul's uncircumcised messianic Galatians are not to give up their foreskin, i.e. Gentile-ness, but on the other hand behave as if they were proper Jews, referring to Abraham as their ancestor, they are not only an anomaly within Jewish law but also violate the basic imperial rules of In and Out, High and Low that the Great Altar of Pergamon has set in stone. Expressed in the language of the beautiful white marble sculptures they are like barbarians, utterly homeless and dangerous in the overall spatial and social arrangement of city and civilization. They have something in common with the ancient Giants/Celts who rise against Olympic, Greek, and Roman rule: a kind of hybrid monsters who undermine the lawful categories and order of *polis*, empire, and cosmos. Like their Giant/Galatian ancestors depicted at the Great Frieze they seek inclusion in a lawless and godless way and therefore need to be pushed back and down.

It might well be that the whole conflict, as Mark Nanos has recently suggested, became obvious with regard to the non-participation of Paul's Gentile congregations in the observances of public religion. As they were "by law" Gentiles, i.e. uncircumcised, they were supposed to take part in civic and imperial worship events, celebrations, meals, sacrifices. If they refused to do so, quoting the first commandment of the One God of Israel, they not only subverted the order and well-being of the city and of the empire. They possibly also threatened the always-fragile status of the "proper" (i.e. circumcised) Jewish congregations who had a special arrangement granted by Caesar that permitted them exemption from public

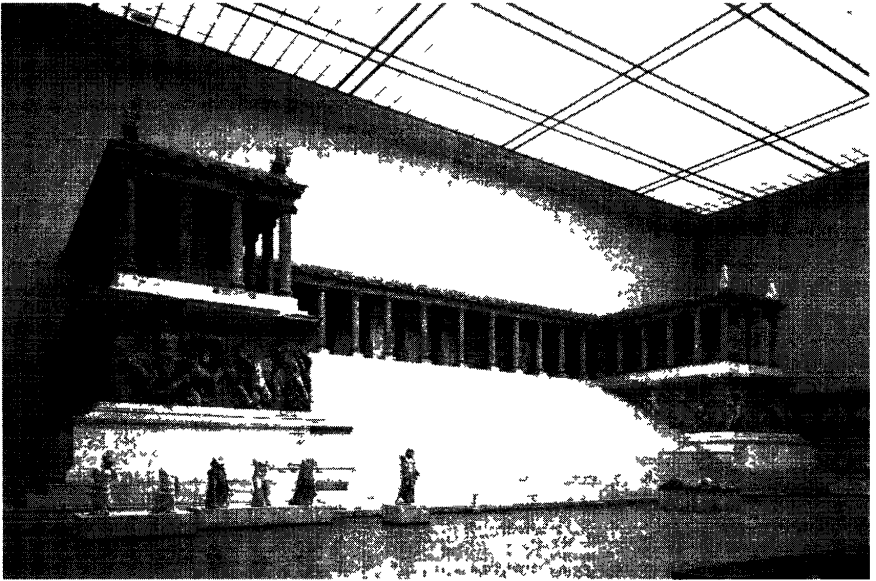


Plate A: The Great Altar of Pergamon, West facade. Reconstruction. Hellenistic. Ca. 170 BCE. Marble, h. 31' 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Photo Jurgen Liepe Photo Credit Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany



Plate B: The Pergamene city goddess Athena and winged Nike in battle against the earth goddess Gaia and her favorite son Alkyoneus. Photo Johannes Laurentius Photo Credit Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany



Plate C Zeus defeating three Giants Photo Credit Erich Lessing / Art Resource NY Antikensammlung Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Germany



Plate D Aphrodite, the goddess of love, steps on the face of a defeated Giant To the right, another snake-legged winged Giant is attacked by Eros from above Photo Credit Vanni / Art Resource NY Antikensammlung Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Germany

religion. Like Nanos, I believe that this may have been the reason why members of the Jewish community approached the Galatians and urged them to get circumcised (Gal 5:2-12; 6:12-13).⁴ The only realistic alternative would have been to return to their customary participation in civic and imperial rituals. As Galatians 4:8-10 may suggest, the Galatians might have thought about this option as well. Paul, however, accepted neither of the two.

This would mean that whatever Paul says against “law” in Galatians deals with a “hybrid” configuration where Jewish and Roman law are intermingled and interacting in a highly complex way. Paul is not targeting Jewishness and Jewish law *per se* but a Jewish law that has been at least partly “hijacked” and desecrated by imperial and civic law. This discourse would surface, for example, in Galatians 3:19ff where Paul presents the lawgiver–mediator as somebody opposed to the ONE god of Israel. The “not-of-the-One” lawgiver thus presumably represents the idols in general and the supreme idol in particular, the Roman emperor. This reading could be supported by the already mentioned Galatians 4:8-10, where the Galatians are accused of going back to the “non-Gods.” But all this takes us many years after Damascus. We have to return to the pre-Damascus Paul now, the holy warrior, with his unflinching zeal for the law of God. We need to give him a horse: because in the symbolic order of the Great Altar he is fully entitled to the battle gear of the superior forces. When he marches against lawless dissidents and rebels within Judaism he, from a certain perspective, might be seen as an “equestrian” (from Latin *equus*, “horse”) of the Roman order as well.

What Happened to Paul before Damascus When He Lost His (Non-Existent) Horse?

But when God...apocalyptically revealed his son in me so that I might proclaim him as gospel among the Gentiles, I did not consult any human being right away...but I went off to Arabia (Gal 1:15-16).

God revealed God’s son in Paul: I believe that the phrase “son of God” has been so overused in Christian language that we have long forgotten what this might have meant in an ancient setting: to declare a crucified one as divine offspring. Let us have a look at the panorama of the Great

4. See Mark Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul’s Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2002), especially 261-65.

Frieze again. The fighting deities of the upper level are “proper” sons and daughters of Gods and goddesses. They fight in families, at the right side, in the right manner and for the right cause. The supreme father figure of Zeus/Jupiter and his motherless daughter Athena/Minerva are focal (see Plates B and C). Heracles, their helper, is a semi-human son of Zeus as well who has stayed faithful to his divine bloodline by helping the gods win the battle. His figure got lost except for the paw of the lion’s skin he is carrying. He must have been fighting right next to Zeus and Athena.

But there are other important “sons of Gods” appearing on the smaller frieze in the inner courtyard of the Great Altar which tells the story of Telephos. Telephos is the son of Heracles, the son of Zeus. The Attalid dynasty of Pergamon claims to be derived from Telephos, thus staging itself as worthy co-combatants of the gods. This pattern was very much alive at Paul’s time. It was adopted by the Roman emperors who loved to be presented as Heracles and as divine seed as well. Moreover, the Julio-Claudian emperors portrayed themselves as derived from Trojan Aeneas, the son of Venus/Aphrodite, the goddess of love. At the Great Frieze she is shown stepping right into the face of her fallen opponent (see Plate D). The divine father in this complicated imperial genealogical construct is Ares/Mars, the God of war who begot Romulus, the founder of Rome. He fights back to back with Venus/Aphrodite in the Pergamene Giant battle, right behind his powerful battle horse.

The Roman emperors are also, in a more direct way, divine sons/*divi filii*. They are adopted by the previous deified emperor who (except for the really bad ones) went up to heaven to be God among gods. “Son of God” (*divi filius*) at Paul’s time therefore is an important part of Caesar’s title.

We need to examine the “counter-family” on the under/outside of the Great Altar. The problem with the Giants is not just that they are all sons of a single mother, Gaia, who is depicted as half-buried in the ground (see Plate B). The Giants are fatherless in an even more shameful and abominable way. According to Hesiod (*Theogony*) and Apollodorus (*Library* 1.1-6) the following happened: When Ouranos/Heaven, the primeval partner of Gaia/Earth was trying to kill the first generation of their children, mother Earth hid them and eventually made a sharp sickle-shaped weapon that was taken up by Kronos/Time against the tyrant-father. He emasculated Ouranos. The blood dripping on the ground made mother Earth pregnant and she gave birth to the Giants. These deviant sons literally are the brood of rebellion against the divine father—and against the sacred institution of patriarchy as a whole. It is “in their blood” if they finally rise against the deities and try to de-throne them. They are the seed of insurgence against divinely sanctioned law and order. Violence against this viper’s brood is

therefore saving the world.

Constant battle against the Giants can be seen as a basic matrix in the deep grammar of Roman law and order. War and punishment are vital to it—and crucifixion is one of its most efficient and brutal weapons. 6,000 crosses at the road from Capua to Rome after the defeat of the slave rebellion of Spartacus around 70 B.C.E. (Appian, *Civil Wars* 1.120); 2,000 crosses to quell unrest at Jerusalem under Varus in 4 B.C.E. (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.75); three crosses at Golgotha around 30 C.E. according to the New Testament and many more during the Jewish war of 66-70 C.E. (Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.449-51). Whenever the Romans punished misbehavior of provincial subjects or rebels of all kinds these were deeds of “pacification” that could be somehow perceived as a contemporary version of the mythological battle against the Giants—just as the Pergamenes propagated their victory over the “marauding Gauls/Galatians” as a Giant battle. Augustus, according to Suetonius, adorned his residence at the island of Capri not with precious statues and paintings, rather with a collection of huge so-called Giant bones and weapons of ancient heroes (*Augustus* 72.3).

We have to go back now to Paul on his way to Damascus. When he was shown by a divine revelation that the crucified Jesus was God’s son (Gal 1:15-16) he did not just fall from his (non-existing) battle horse. It was the whole battle-order that must have collapsed for him. His imageless God, all of a sudden, had made himself visible, had “revealed” (*apokalypsai*) his image in a way that shattered all the images. In the symbolic universe of the Great Altar, God adopts one of those who have rejected their imperial father and fatherland and turns him into a son of God like Caesar. One of the deformed sons from “below,” who are doomed to die for the sake of law and order, is raised from the dead and dying. In the language of the images this spells out as a horrendous divine act of civil disobedience on a cosmic scale. Translated into the imagery of the Giant battle we see God-father act like a barbarian. He undermines the gods. All of a sudden he appears on the wrong side that at the Great Frieze happens to be the side of the desperate Earth mother who tries to save her favorite son Alkyoneus from Athena’s murderous grip (see Plate B). God supports the “undeserving” mother. This is something that God-father Zeus/Jupiter by definition would and could never ever do. It would ruin the very concept of the Great Altar.

God has openly broken out of the heavenly alliance and “outed” himself as one who makes common course with the chief enemy. By appearing on the “other” side God dismantles God as supreme reason and justification for hunting down the enemy OTHER. God thus in the most blasphemous way not just destroys the image of the divine but, even worse, the

image of the enemy. This divine savagery is a cosmic iconoclasm. It is folly for the Greeks and a theological scandal for the Jews (see 1 Cor 1:23). If you see the world like this—God down rather than up, out rather than in (or maybe God embracing in and out, up and down)—you have lost your clear eyesight.

This distorted vision, this totally wrong and mad perception, this loss of meaning and control—this is what Paul calls God’s revelation, *apokalypsis*, un-veiling. Acts creatively narrates it as blindness. One of Paul’s most brilliant nineteenth-century interpreters who had a keen sensitivity for this incomprehensible act of visual and intellectual madness, and furiously attacked and rejected it, was Friedrich Nietzsche in his *Antichrist* (see Jan Rehmann’s contribution to this volume).

What it actually meant to proclaim this crazy new worldview of a divine SELF becoming OTHER as “good news among the Gentiles” (Gal 1:16)—this is what God obviously did not tell Paul before Damascus. It took the apostle 14 years and a lot of foot travel throughout the Roman empire (Gal 1:17-24) to figure out how a gospel of divine victory and universal salvation other than Caesar’s might be preached to the non-Jewish nations other than Israel but subjugated to Roman rule in the same way (see Davina Lopez’s contribution to this volume). It is not just that Paul had fallen from his horse. With his new way of seeing the world he inevitably must have fallen under the vigorous footsteps of beautiful and pitiless Venus/Aphrodite as well, the emperor’s unforgiving great-grandmother (see Plate D). You gain a different perspective from under there.

Counter-images: What is Paul’s New Perspective from under the Horse’s Hooves?

Paul had been away for 14 years: Arabia, Damascus, Syria, Cilicia, a short private stay in Jerusalem. A Jew just walking around with this paradoxical apocalyptic “good news” for the non-Jews. Did he, step by step, understand what it meant? Did he find listeners? Did he preach at all or maybe just prayed and walked and talked and worked for his living? We don’t know. But it is clear that he was “out” himself now, a Jewish outsider among the Gentile outsiders. Would he have stayed there without ever going back “in”? Maybe.

We mostly overlook that the Damascus event in Galatians consists of two parts: Revelation number one brings Paul down from his horse and out to the Gentile Other. And then, after many years of contemplation and practice, a revelation number two happens that brings Paul back and

up to Jerusalem again. “I went in accordance with a revelation (*apokalypsis*)”—Galatians 2:2. This second revelation makes Paul revisit and face his Jewishness and Self from a new angle. Both revelations are vital to understand the messianic logic that unfolds when Paul brings Titus the Greek to Jerusalem, claims him to be his brother in Christ, and nobody can force Titus to get circumcised (Gal 2:1-3). There is a lot of struggle and drama going on, with fake brothers and spies trying to prove that Paul’s ideas of the messianic gospel are wrong—clearly it is Paul now who is singled out as a heretic by the watchdogs of “proper faith” (Gal 2:4-5). The battle cry is circumcision versus foreskin. A physical sign functions as the decisive boundary marker between “us” and “them,” Self and Other. The world order, we have said, rests on this boundary. If Titus wants to belong to us, why is he not circumcised? Why is he staying “Other”?

There are political implications as well. To live according to Jewish law is a precious privilege granted by the emperor. What message do “we” convey if we disregard our own law? Titus is “by law” a non-Jew. Non-Jews are obliged to participate in civic and imperial religion. If Paul thinks this is not appropriate, as he clearly does, he endangers the rest of the Jewish community. There is a clear line between circumcision=exemption from imperial religion *or* foreskin=participation: anything in-between is illicit association, dangerous anarchy and irreverence to Augustus/Sebastos, the divine son, high priest (*pontifex maximus*) of the state cult, and worldwide God together with goddess Roma. At this point the final part of the Damascus revelation happens:

But on the contrary, when they saw that I have been entrusted with the gospel of the foreskin, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel of the circumcision...and recognizing the grace given to me, James and Cephas and John (who are perceived as “pillars”) gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship...Only that we should remember the poor...(Gal 2:7-10).

The leading figures of the Jerusalem congregation “saw” something that had been hidden and invisible to them before: Paul has been entrusted by God with a gospel that is different from their own but still the gospel of Christ, or even more challenging: the gospel of Christ consists of two gospels—gospel of foreskin and gospel of circumcision. The Oneness of God/Christ integrates and reconciles Self and Other without making it “same” (Figure 4).

This is the final breakdown of the old world order, the battle order, and its replacement by a new creation. Three arms are extended to Paul

Jerusalem Agreement (Gal 2:10)

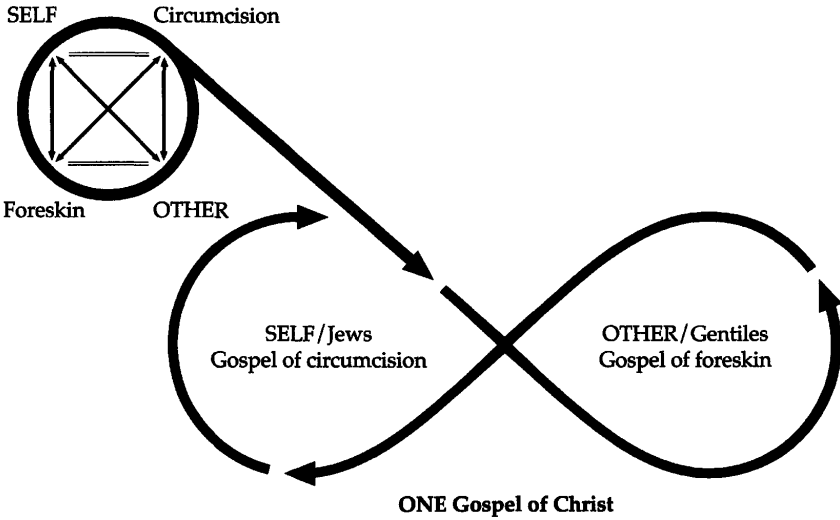


Figure 4.

and Barnabas in fellowship and embrace rather than fight. The Other, the Gentiles, return this fellowship in terms of material solidarity with the poor in Jerusalem, the collection. And, finally, Jews and Gentiles eat together at Antioch (Gal 2:12).

What happens to Paul and the messianic movement at Jerusalem and at the Antiochene table doesn't have a counterpart in the Great Altar. It is the most radical counter-image imaginable and requires a whole new set of images. It is a dream, a vision, a re-imagination, in short: a revelation. It would entirely transform the Great Frieze, starting with its centerpiece, the encounter between Athena and Gaia/Earth (see Plate B). If we look at this image closely we can see how Athena from above tries to separate Alkyoneus, Gaia's favorite son, from his mother below, stepping between the two of them with her beautifully-draped knee, at the same time pulling him up by his hair. Legend has it that Alkyoneus must die the very moment he loses touch with mother Earth. The poison of Athena's snake is already entering his body, and his face is in pain. How could we imagine a messianic transfiguration of that murderous, heart-breaking scene? Is it imaginable that Athena *stops* dragging Alkyoneus away from his life-sustaining connection with Gaia? That she loosens her deadly grip, changes her mind, sits down at Gaia's table, sharing the fruits of the Earth contained in Gaia's abundant cornucopia rather than winning them through

war? We can see how Gaia offers this fruit pleadingly in her left hand, asking mercy for her son—and now Alkyoneus could live indeed, breaking bread together with Athena and Gaia in a feast, recovering from Athena's poison.

Athena and Gaia, these two most powerful women representing *polis* and *chora*, city and countryside, culture and nature would be finally reconciled. The mother and the motherless, set up by father Zeus for eternal fight, would be not fighting any more. The rape of the land by the city would end and a civilization without devastation of nature and humankind come into being. Do we have the courage to imagine such a new civilization not based on victory but cooperation? A civilization that, even under the scrutiny of Athena's sharp mind, would prove to be more sustainable, beneficial and therefore "rational" than the one born out of the Giant battle (see John Dominic Crossan's contribution to this volume)?

Imagine that winged Nike/Victory joined the table community as well. On the Great Frieze she adorns the triumphant Athena from behind with a crown of victory. See her let go of the insignia of supreme power and of the obsession to be the only (and lonely) one who wins world rule—rather than friends and table companions. Listen to her praising the bread unspoiled by blood and poison, declaring that peace can't be built on victory and war, nor on domination of ONE nation over the OTHER. And while all the other deities of the Great Frieze slowly let their arms sink, dropping their swords, lances, torches, snake pots and tiresome postures of petrified heroism, while they sit down and rest, the dead and dying Giants from below slowly rise—not to take world power, but just to sit down at the table as well.

One might declare this as hopelessly utopian, as dream-world images beyond anything that ever could be compatible with human realities. But this is what the messianic table of Antioch according to Galatians 2:11-14 was about: the table of a new age and world order where Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, free and slave, male and female, Goddesses and Giants ate together (see Gal 3:28). It is a table where everybody is admitted but not everything is permitted. Both Self and Other must make peace with their former enemies, share food with those declared poison and pest for ages. It is a table where the poor belong and all children are fed, because they are all perceived as children of God.

This table indeed ran so much against the logic of any established worldview, religion and law that it did not last long: Peter and Barnabas and the other members of the Jewish community, as we know, withdrew (Gal 2:12-14). And this is where Paul starts talking about justification by faith and grace apart from works of the law (Gal 2:15-21). Whatever Paul

tries to tell the Galatians theologically, his whole doctrine of justification deals with justifying this inclusive messianic table at Roman Antioch, in Roman Galatia or elsewhere in the Roman empire. After Paul had become Other himself at Damascus he was shown in part two of the Damascus revelation that it was not enough to be a Jew among the Giants/Gentiles, but that he had to bring Jews and Gentiles together at the One table that transforms One and Other into One-an(d)-Other: the table of the new creation.

This is where we would need to really start reading the letter. But this is where we have to stop. I want to make a concluding remark about the “clash of images”:

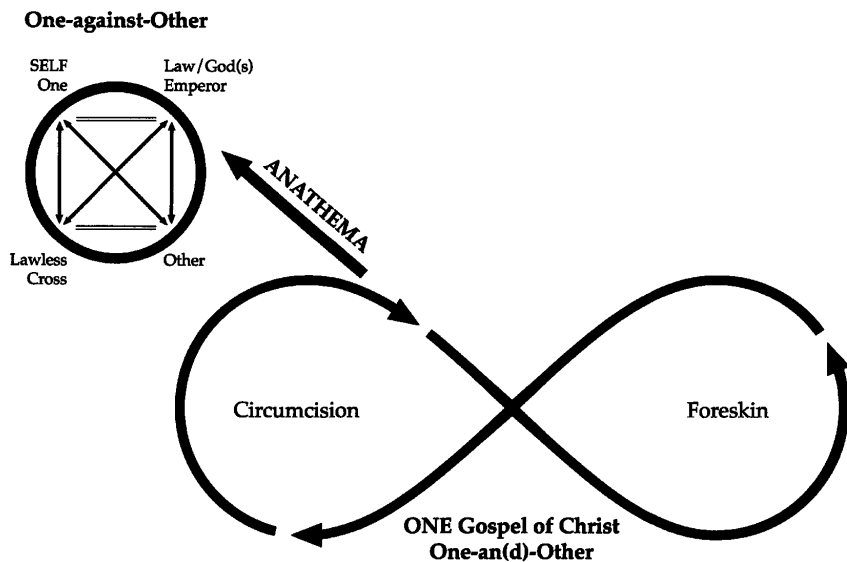
How Did Paul Get Back on His Horse?

The images of empire are powerful. They seem natural, convincing, convenient. They effortlessly impose their rules of perception, make one see and be seen in their likeness. So many times during these past weeks I had the spontaneous impulse to quickly turn around the Prima Porta statue of emperor Augustus standing on his head on our conference posters (see the poster’s image in this volume) and bring everything back into the “right order”—without even thinking about it.

This is what happened to Paul. Not to the historical Paul, I believe, who wrote Galatians and who was later executed by the Roman imperial order like Jesus—and all the other dying giants/Galatians depicted at the Great Altar. Rome and its local agents understood that something was seriously wrong with this message of a disorderly inclusive table at the underside of the altar, rather than high up on the inside: in Gaia’s earthen kitchen rather than in Jupiter’s white banquet halls, so to say. This one was a counter-imperial universal integration “from below,” around the table of a crucified Jewish troublemaker, rather than the proper integration of Jews and Galatians, Greeks and all the other nations by well-established mechanisms and practices of imperial religion and ordering. The Romans knew how to integrate diversity very well, but the identity politics they were masters of was an identity politics “from above.” From a Roman perspective it therefore didn’t take a revelation to see that Paul’s messianic inclusiveness and Jewish/Galatian community-in-diversity at the table of a crucified Jewish insurgent was illicit and dangerous like ancient hordes of Giants. It was the most radical subversion of the Pergamene sanctuary and the symbolic world order of empire, turning the inside of the Great altar-table out and the cosmos upside down (see Gal 6:14).

When Peter and Barnabas and all the others withdraw from the messianic table at Antioch in Galatians 2:12, Paul therefore sees something other than just a withdrawal into the comfort zones of the established Jewish pattern—he perceives it as a return to the law of the emperor. That’s why he accuses Peter to live in a Gentilish, idolatrous way right at the moment when he has proven his Jewishness by separating from the Gentiles (Gal 2:14). What Paul “sees” is that the apocalyptic order of world peace revealed to him as new creation was replaced by the old imperial battle order again. In the name of God the worldview of the idols is brought back into the picture: the *divi filius* rules the world, the son of the imperial god(s), not the law of the messiah (Gal 6:2) who is the son of the Other and One God of Israel. This is the *Anathema* Paul proclaims in Galatians 1:8-9 (Figure 5), declaring foreskin and circumcision as a *status confessionis*—a conflict where the core issue of faith is at stake. Paul perceives the Antiochene table as an eschatological crossroads of “worldly” versus messianic allegiance. At Antioch one cannot confess the crucified and the emperor as sons of God at the same time, follow the messiah as well as the imperial law and battle order: the order of this evil present age (Gal 1:4).

Paul’s Anathema (Gal 1:8-9)



Messianic versus imperial law and order

Figure 5.

But only two tiny letters needed to be changed to replace the “EVIL ORDER of this present age” (Gal 1:4), i.e. the imperial battle order of One-against-Other, by an EVIL OTHER—and the emperor was back on his feet again. And Paul again on his battle horse, once more a soldier of the prevailing master order. The dominant SELF, however, now was defined as *Christian ONE*, fighting against Jewish, Muslim, pagan and a lot of other OTHERS. This would mean that what we “normally” read as gospel of Paul is pretty much the message of the pre-Damascus holy warrior—and of his opponents. At a time when we are again in a “Christian” battle against a worldwide barbarian Other it seems more important than ever to get the theology of the empire down from its horse—and Paul back on his feet.⁵

5. Selected references: B. Andreae, “The Image of the Celts in Etruscan, Greek and Roman Art,” in *The Celts* (ed. S. Moscati; Venice: Bompiani, 1991), 61-69; D. L. Balch, “Paul’s Portrait of Christ Crucified (Gal 3:1) in Light of Paintings of Suffering and Death in Pompeian Houses,” in *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (ed. D. L. Balch and C. Osiek; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 84-108; J. D. Crossan and J. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus’s Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004); A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient Near East* (rev. ed.; trans. W. E. Wilson; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995); E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); V. Kästner, “The Architecture of the Great Altar of Pergamon,” in *Pergamon: Citadel of the Gods* (ed. H. Koester; Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998), 137-62; S. Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor* (2 Vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); K. Strobel, *Die Galater. Geschichte und Eigenart der keltischen Staatenbildung auf dem Boden des hellenistischen Kleinasien* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996); J. Taubes, *Die politische Theologie des Paulus* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1993); P. Zanker, *The Power of the Images in the Age of Augustus* (trans. Alan Shapiro; Jerome Lectures 16; Ann Arbor, Mich.: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1991); and four essays in *From Pergamon to Sperlonga: Sculpture and Context* (ed. N. T. de Grummond and B. S. Ridgway; Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000): N. T. de Grummond, “Gauls and Giants, Skylla and Palladion,” 255-78; E. S. Gruen, “Culture as policy: The Attalids of Pergamon,” 17-31; J. R. Marszal, “Ubiquitous Barbarians: Representation of the Gauls at Pergamon and Elsewhere,” 191-234; and A. Stewart, “Pergamo ara marmorea magna: On the Date, Reconstruction, and Functions of the Great Altar of Pergamon,” 32-57.



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