Reading Communities & St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans

An 18th Century Native American Reading

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Each of us today is presenting a brief look into how different communities have used St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans over time and how this can help us think about Reading Communities in Imperial Rome. I am going to be talking about a Native American use of Romans from 18th Century New England, and I will be focusing in particular on what is called "reception theory." **Reception Theory** examines how readers realize the potentials of a text and how readings change over the course of time. I will be giving an example of how one Native American reader read St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans in light of 18th Century race conflict, and then ask how this impacts our reading of Romans in its original context.

My own work is on Native American communities and early writings in colonial New England. I am interested in how Native Americans used the rhetoric and religion of their colonizers to "fight back" against the system. I will focus in particular today on one writer, Mohegan minister Samson Occom. I want to give you a brief background on who Occom was, how the bible influenced the way Native Americans were thought about in his day, and how his use of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans in his most famous sermon (the "Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul," a Mohegan in 1772) challenges the dominant view about Native Americans in New England.

Samson Occom was born in 1723 in a Mohegan Indian community in Connecticut. At the age of sixteen he was "awakened and converted" to Christianity under the influence of white itinerant ministers. Shortly thereafter, Occom began learning English

and studying scripture under the tutelage of Eleazar Wheelock, a prominent missionary interested in training young Native American men to act as Christian ministers to their own people. Occom was officially ordained as a minister in 1759, and he dedicated much of his early life to promoting Wheelock's missions and projects. Occom was famous in his day both for his ministry to Native Communities, and for the series of sermons he gave to whites in England on a fund-raising tour that raised money for to start what is now Dartmouth College.

Occom was famous enough that between 1750 and 1766, he sat for at least three different portraits. These paintings signaled a certain triumph for Occom: in the eighteenth-century, portraiture was a sign of status, either because one had enough money to commission a painting or because one had a certain moral, social, or historical significance which was deemed worthy of remembrance (L. Miller 161, 163-68, 178-79). I would like to look at one of these closely as it epitomize eighteenth-century attempts to understand and fix the identity of the Mohegan minister, and Native Americans in general—identities that Occom will challenge through his use of Romans in the sermon I mentioned.

In the earliest portrait, Nathaniel Smibert styles Occom according to the conventions of eighteenth-century Indian portraiture. Occom wears a cape draped in the style of the Roman emperors, and he is placed in the foreground of a verdant New England landscape. The correlation between Occom's appearance and that of classical rulers does more than emphasize that Occom is a noble pagan: it also insists that Occom, as an American Indian, is already part of the past. He is part of a history which, like the Roman empire, must inevitably, though tragically, fall. The pastoral landscape reiterates the romanticism of this genre: nature's beauty and abundance must also decline in the wake of colonial conquest and its cultivating impulse. Enveloped in a moment of

imperialist nostalgia, Occom become worthy of remembrance precisely because he is part of a culture which, in imperial eyes, cannot endure.

This view of Occom was supported by Puritan readings of the Old and New Testaments. New England Puritans read their encounters with Native Americans typologically. Typology (and this is on your handout) in its strictest sense, refers to the practice of explicating signs in the Old Testament as foreshadowing events, personages, ceremonies, and objects in the New Testament. According to typological logic, Old Testament signs, or "types," prefigure their fulfillment or "antitype" in Christ. Applied more broadly, typology enabled Puritans to read biblical types as forecasting not only the events of the New Testament but also their own historical situation and experiences. These events in turn foreshadowed the Second Coming of Christ. Accordingly, the Puritans spoke of themselves as God's chosen people, the Israelites, and of their travels to America as the Exodus out of Egypt and into Canaan. This meant that Native Americans, as the indigenous inhabitants, were often seen as "Canaanites," a heathen people whom God sent as a scourge to test the nation of Israel and whose extermination was necessary for the fulfillment of his divine plan. Some Puritans who were on more friendly terms with the Indians proposed that maybe instead they were one of the lost tribes of Israel, or (and this option wasn't quite as good) a lost strand of Roman pagans, decendants of Brutus perhaps. Occom's portrait reflects this more positive view, which carried with the implicit idea that Native Americans, like Roman pagans, could be converted to Christianity before they conveniently disappeared.

It was within this context that in 1772 Samson Occom preached to a mixed white and Native crowd his sermon on the Execution of Moses Paul, a Mohegan man who "in a drunken fury smashed the skull of a highly respected [white] citizen of Waterbury

named Moses Cook" and killed him (*NAAL* 4th ed. I:639). Executions were popular events in colonial New England. As criminalist Daniel Cohen notes, trials and executions became a means of expressing social tensions as eighteenth-century New England society became increasingly pluralistic (Cohen 30). New England citizens viewed the criminals not as representative of the sinful state of their own community, but as indicative of the "sores" cultural others--such as drunken Indians--inflicted upon the body politic. In this sense, American Indian drunkenness supported this typological vision of Algonquians as licentious Canaanites, a vision which white listeners and readers could use to confirm both their own sense of moral superiority and their sense of American Indian inferiority. It is ironic then, that Occom's sermon both anticipates this response and works strategically to undermine it. By choosing Romans as his central biblical text, Occom is able to redraw American Indian identities in three central ways: he reconfigures American Indians as insiders within God's spiritual community, he undermines white attempts to use American Indians as scapegoats, and he addresses white hypocrisy.

Occom's sermon begins with a quote from Romans 6:23: *For the Wages of Sin is Death, but the Gift of God is Eternal Life through Jesus Christ our Lord.* This passage, and Romans more generally serve as the backbone for Occom's sermon. For example, Occom's sermon mirrors the divisions of audience and the forms of address from Romans. In Romans, St. Paul divides his audience into two parties, the Jews and the Gentiles. Likewise, after addressing Moses Paul, Occom divides his audience into two groups--Anglo Americans and American Indians. When addressing each party, Occom maintains the labels St. Paul gives his audiences: Occom calls the whites "reverend gentlemen and fathers of Israel," while he labels the American Indians "my brethren and kindred," much as St. Paul the Gentiles "Brethren" (Romans 10).

By basing the explication section of his sermon upon the opening chapters of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Occom counters his white audience's assumption that American Indians are outsiders to God's spiritual community. St. Paul's Letter to the Romans undertakes the important spiritual work of assimilating cultural outsiders--the Roman gentiles--into God's spiritual community (Fitzmeyer 32-33, 75-80). Like Paul, Occom redefines community along the lines of faith, rather than race. Thus, Moses Paul's offense becomes spiritual rather than racial. As Occom points out in his address to "*My poor unhappy Brother MOSES*," Moses Paul's sin is not that he is an "Indian, a despised creature, but [that] you have despised yourself; yea you have despised God more" ("SP" 956). According to Occom, many famous Christians have suffered and been persecuted, but unlike Moses Paul they have endured it and not turned against God ("SP" 955-56). The afflictions American Indians face do not distinguish them from Christians at large, but instead place them within the mainstream of Christian experience.

By reweaving Mohegan Moses Paul into the social fabric of eighteenth-century Christian society, Occom rejects the tendency of contemporary execution sermons to use cultural outsiders as spiritual scapegoats. The divisions of audience and forms of address found in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans help Occom to achieve this end. In the application section of his sermon, Occom reformulates the connection between American Indian sin and Anglo American reformation by rereading the situation in light of the relationship between the Gentiles and Jews in Romans. Whereas Old Testament types suggested that Anglo Americans were God's chosen, though sometimes chastised, people, Romans clearly states that Jews were not chosen over Gentiles ("there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek") and that the Jews themselves were desperately in need of improvement (Romans 2:11-12, 21-24, 11:11-12, 25-26). Indeed, the conversion of the Gentiles takes on a whole new meaning in Romans: St. Paul argues

that "through their [the Jews'] fall salvation *is come* unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy" and that "all Israel" will only be saved once "the fullness of Gentiles be come in" (Romans 11:11-12, 25-26). This puts a certain weight upon the conversion of Moses Paul and the other American Indians present at Occom's sermon: if American Indians are Gentiles and white Puritans are Jews, white salvation is dependent not upon exorcising American Indians and American Indian sin, but upon American Indian conversion and white reformation.

Finally, By dividing his audience along the same lines as the Jews and Gentiles in Romans, Occom is able to accuse whites indirectly of the same sin that St. Paul accused Jews of--hypocrisy. In Romans 2:17-29, St. Paul castigates the Jews for their pride in their feigned righteousness. Here, St. Paul's call against the Jews echoes common complaints by Native Americans. British misbehavior had dishonored God and Christianity in American Indian eyes: most American Indian communities which declined missionary activities during this era cited white hypocrisy and unChristian behavior as primary factors in their decision. Throughout New England, whites traders sold alcohol to American Indians as a means of cheating them out of furs, food, and land (Frazier 7). In comparing whites to the Jews in Romans, Occom dredges up a series of associations which, at the time, were not out of sync with American Indians' perceptions of white behavior.

Interestingly, Occom's use of Romans does not seem to have bothered his white contemporaries. Occom's sermon pleased the public imagination so well that it went through at least nineteen editions, including a Welch translation and a transcription into verse, which I have given you on the back of your handout (Love 174). The verse version points to one of the key ideas behind reception theory: not all readers get the same thing out of a text. You might ask yourself what in Occom's sermon appealed to this poet.

This leads me back to St. Paul in his Roman context. Occom's "counterhegemonic" use of St. Paul is an important reminder for me. St. Paul was far from being an "imperalistic oppressor," but rather is a fringe radical who was struggling against both the Roman hierarchy and the Jewish elite. To whom in the empire might Paul's ideology have appealed and why? Is this a subversive document? What would St. Paul have thought of Occom's use of Romans?

To help you begin to answer these questions, it is worth placing Paul within the context of Rome as you know it already. Paul's "Letter to the Romans is unique among Paul's surviving writings in that was written by Paul to a church he had not founded and had never visited" (Kee 484). [You will notice on your timeline that Paul wrote the letter before he got to Rome.] We don't have any direct information about the founding of the Christian community in Rome, except that we do know that most of its original members were probably Jewish, as they were expelled by the decree of Claudius against the Jews (Kee 484). Paul's address is not only to these Jews, however, but is also to the gentiles. In Romans 13:1-7, Paul is careful to emphasize that "the pagan Roman state is not a threat to the young church, but as the instrument of maintenance of social order it is to be honored and Christians are to pay the required taxes to support it" (Kee 490). As the editors to the *Cambridge Companion to the Bible* note, "Up to this point in his career, Roman authority had made possible Paul's safe travel against attack by his opponents. In Paul's letter to the Philippians and in Acts, Paul is seized and imprisoned by civil authorities as a disturber of the peace, but the Roman powers do not charge him with political subversion, exhibit hostility, or prohibit him from carrying on his work. Even when he is sent from Palestine to Rome for a hearing before Caesar, the regional Roman authorities find nothing subversive or contrary to Roman law in his activities (Acts 26:32)" (Kees 490). It is unclear what the charge was against him that led to his

execution, but it seems that he was martyred under Nero. Is there anything subversive about Paul's message that might get past Roman radar, but which eventually led to his downfall? Or would he have seen Occom's use of his work as a "misreading"? I will leave these questions for you to discuss in conference.

Reading Comunities and St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans

An 18th Century Native American Reading

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Samson Occom (1723-1792): Mohegan minister. The Mohegans are the northern most branch of the Pequot Indians who lived in what is now Connecticut. Occom is the author of "**Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul**" (1772) based on Romans 6.23 "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal through Jesus Christ our Lord." (See reverse for verse version of Sermon)

Timeline: Paul and his Context

10CE	Born
33-5	Paul Converts
34-8	Three years in Arabia
37/8	Initial visit with apostles in Jerusalem
38-47	Active in Antioch and Syria
40	By this time Christianity was established as a movement throughout Palestine
41	CALIGULA murdered; CLAUDIUS emperor
41-42	Christians expand influence; breakdown of relations between Jews and Romans
44	Herod Agrippa (grandson of Herod I) dies, decreasing persecution.
46-48	Paul's first missionary journey to Cyprus, Galatia, Pisidia, etc.
48	Return to Jerusalem
49-52	Second missionary journey.
52-4	Active in Ephesus
54	CLAUDIUS dies; NERO takes over empire
53-56	Paul in Ephesus.
56-57	A tour of inspection. Writes Epistle to the Romans
58-59	Imprisoned in Jerusalem
59-60	Journey to Rome
60-62	Paul in Rome
62-63	Paul Imprisoned and Executed in Rome
64	Burning of Rome
68	Nero kills himself, end of Julian-Claudian line of Emperors

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