

Reading Paul in the Context of Empire: Roman Imperialism, Pauline Resistance, and Contemporary Implications

1. Introduction: Reclaiming Paul for the Service of Life

There is an interesting trajectory that can be observed within English-speaking New Testament scholarship over the last one hundred years. At the turn of the century, there was a brief moment when Marxist scholars received widespread attention for engaging the New Testament documents. They offered historical-critical readings that challenged the then dominant conservative understandings of Jesus and Paul. According to that conservative viewpoint the Gospels Paul's Epistles, and the rest of the New Testament gave voice to a bourgeois spirituality that reinforced a conservative social, economic, and political ethics. Thus, in the early and middle decades of the 20th century, conservative scholars successfully suppressed the budding Marxist interest in Christianity. However, as the century progressed – and as historical criticism in all its various offshoots continued to expand – the conservative understanding of the New Testament, and the characters contained therein, became more and more difficult to sustain. Now, in the early 21st century, several paradigm shifts have occurred in mainstream biblical scholarship. Many views that had been considered radical, dangerous, and just plain wrong, now function as truisms. Yes, John's Apocalypse is not some mystical book about the end of the world – it is actually a coded attack upon the death-dealing theopolitical economy of Rome. Yes, Jesus was not a religious leader offering guilt-ridden individuals a way for their souls to escape to heaven – he was actually a poor Jewish peasant who threatened the basic building blocks of both Jewish and Roman society because he sought to develop a community of people who lived a Jubilee-based economics and refused to respect prior social divisions based upon gender, status, holiness, wealth, age, health, or ethnicity.

This shift in scholarship has been somewhat disconcerting for those who are invested in a conservative reading of the New Testament (and who still respect divisions based upon the things just mentioned). A lot of ground has been lost. Therefore, there has been a mass exodus to Paul. Thus, while Jesus may have been awful nice because he died for our sins, Paul is taken to be the true guide for moral living today. While Jesus' words need to be contextualized – as when he tells a certain young man to sell everything he has and give the money to the poor – Paul's words need no contextualization but should be taken to mean what they (plainly) mean. In this way, Paul's words seem to have become more timeless and divine than the words of Jesus.

Unfortunately for those who have made this stand in Paul's Epistles, the last twenty years have seen a great deal of work done in Pauline scholarship – work that focuses on reading Paul more and more in light of his own context, and less and less in light of our own religious traditions and cultural biases. As a result, Paul is increasingly understood to be living in a faithful trajectory to the subversive work began by Jesus and, in the New Testament, concluded in John's Apocalypse. What is being discovered is a Paul who was “counter-imperial” – a Paul who worked tirelessly on behalf of the life-giving Commonwealth of God. Due to this commitment to life and to the God of Life, Paul also worked subversively and even treasonously against all death-dealing Powers – Powers that were especially concentrated in the imperial politics and economics of his day. Therefore, over the course of the next two hours, I hope to open up this life-giving reading of Paul to you. The truth is that imperial national and transnational political and economic Powers continue to operate in death-dealing ways in our own context. Therefore, instead of surrendering Paul to death-dealing readings, I wish to reclaim Paul as an apostle of new life rising-up out of death.

2. Opening a Space for Life-Giving Readings of Paul: A Contextual Reading of Pauline Terms and Themes

In order to engage in this task, I would like to open the space for life-giving readings of Paul by looking closely at a number of the key terms and themes he employs. In particular, I wish to highlight how several terms that contemporary Christians often read as “theological” or “spiritual,” actually find a great deal of resonance and overlap with the language of imperial Roman propaganda. Surprisingly, when Paul writes his epistles, he uses language that his readers would hear as deeply and provocatively political.

Unfortunately, we tend to miss these contextual overtones due to a few thousand years of appropriating Paul and making him more accommodating to the *status quo* and to the lives of those whose privilege depends upon the exploitation of others. Making Paul into the “first Christian theologian” or a fundamentally “religious” or “spiritual” figure conveniently distances him from the material spheres of politics and economics. Hence, the religious, spiritual, and theological Paul – who focuses upon either the inner realm of the conscience or the spiritual realm of the soul – is a Paul who is easily domesticated. No wonder, then, that North American Christians (a people whose food, clothing, fuel, children's toys, and electronics are all deeply stained with the blood of others), tend to prefer Paul-the-theologian over any other character in Scripture. This Paul does not deeply challenge our lives as we currently live them.

Therefore, I would like for us to step back and reexamine Paul’s language in more detail so that we can recover the nuances they carry within their original context. When we have recovered the original cultural and political nuances of this language, we will be well on our way to recovering Paul as a person deeply concerned about politics, economics, and the various things that contribute to the ways in which people concretely share life together. This Paul, I think, offers us a great deal more than the pale domesticated version of Paul that has come to dominate North American Christianity over the last century.

2.1 The Gospel: Good News... about whom, for whom?

Most of us raised in a Christian environment – especially a North American Protestant environment – would probably identify “the gospel” as the heart of Paul’s life and writings. Indeed, Paul’s letters are loaded with references to “the gospel” at key places. For example, he opens the letter to the Romans by identifying himself as “Paul, a slave of Jesus the Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God... the gospel concerning [God’s] son... Jesus Christ our Lord” (vv1-6). In verse 9, Paul repeats his assertion that he is dedicated to serving “the gospel” of God’s Son, Jesus, and in verses 15-17a, he writes:

hence, my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in the Gospel the righteous justice of God [*dikaioσyne theou*] is revealed.

Thus, the importance of this term becomes immediately apparent.

What is not as immediately apparent, however, is what “the gospel” is. This is a crucial point, especially since Paul regularly voices concerns that members of the assemblies of Jesus could be led astray by other gospels. Thus, in 2 Cor 11.4, Paul expresses his concern that the Corinthians will be seduced by “a different gospel”. Further, in Gal 1.6-9, Paul urges the Galatians not to embrace a “different gospel” or “pervert the gospel” or accept “a gospel contrary” to what had previously been proclaimed.

So what was “the gospel” that Paul proclaimed and what were the other “gospels” that he

hated? We probably all know that the Greek word for gospel – *euangelion* – literally means “good news”. Further, I imagine that we have all been taught that the “good news” that Paul proclaimed was Christ’s gracious atoning death bringing about the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation for those with faith. The gospel Paul hated was the Jewish effort to bring works-righteousness back into the equation. The problem with this answer is that it is wrong on both points.

Beginning with the latter point, the forms of Judaism contemporary to Paul were not dominated by any sort of “works-righteousness.” As E. P. Sanders and the adherents of the “New Perspective on Paul” have adequately demonstrated, Second Temple Judaism was (more often than not) a grace-based way of life that relied upon “covenantal nomism” – individuals were included as members of God’s covenant people through the grace of God and they then demonstrated that membership by following the law of God.¹ Torah obedience was a sign that one had already been saved and it was not something people did in order to earn salvation. With this in mind, it is worth reconsidering what other forms of “good news” might have confronted the early followers of Jesus.

Before we develop this search for alternatives, we must return to our former point and offer a more accurate definition of what Paul means when he refers to “the good news”. This is a point N. T. Wright explores in detail. After decisively challenging post-Reformation Protestant understandings of Paul’s gospel, Wright defines the good news as the proclamation that “Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is Lord.”² Therefore, for Paul, the gospel is primarily a statement about the lordship of Jesus. However, this statement carries a great deal of significance for all people – for the entire *cosmos* – because Jesus is understood to be the Lord of all.

This, then, carries all sorts of implications when we realize that the word *euangelion* did not just refer to any sort of good news in Paul’s context. In fact, it tended to be a term favoured by imperial Roman propaganda and referred to a certain form of *political* good news. Specifically, the gospel tended to be the proclamation of the good news of the birth or triumph of the Roman Emperor. Thus, according to the dominant script of the ruling powers, the gospel was the good news of the coming of Augustus and his heirs, who saved the world by establishing a universal peace.³

Therefore, Paul’s use of the word *euangelion* would have obvious political overtones to the original recipients of his letters.⁴ As Michael Gorman aptly puts it, Paul proclaims a “theopolitical gospel” about “God’s intervention in history” which must be understood as both a “theological” and a “political” event.⁵ Or as Jacques Louis Martyn says, Paul’s gospel refers to “God’s new, militant act in the invasive sending of his Son, Jesus Christ.”⁶ In a situation where the good news was supposed to be about Augustus and would benefit Rome and her elite allies, Paul declares that the good news is actually about Jesus and would benefit all people. No wonder, then, that Paul argues that “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4.4). In this context, the Emperor is the god of this world, and the unbelievers are unable to recognize the good news of the glory of Christ, because Jesus died as a criminal – executed by the laws of Caesar, whose divine image was known across the empire.

Making this argument does not take away from the validity of noting the resonance the word

¹ Cf. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.

² N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 46; cf. 45-57. Eleven years later, Wright slightly expands on this definition and argues that “the gospel, in the New Testament, is the good news that God (the world’s creator) is at last becoming king and that Jesus, whom this God has raised from the dead, is the world’s true lord” (*Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 226-27).

³ Cf. Dieter Georgi 1991, 83-85.

⁴ A point affirmed by, for example, Warren Carter 2002, 474; Crossan and Reed, 2004, 11; Elliott in Horsley 2008, 98; Strom 84-85; Wright 2000, 164-70;

⁵ Gorman 2004, 107-108.

⁶ Martyn in Harink 2010, 14.

“gospel” has within Second Temple Judaism and the Septuagint.⁷ Paul, as “a zealous and blameless Pharisee” (cf. Phil 3.4-6), would have been aware of the passages in Deutero-Isaiah that employ this language (cf. Is 5.27, 61.1). In light of this Jewish reference point, some have argued that Paul is not actually interacting with imperial Roman propaganda but is simply continuing the religious, but not political, traditions of Judaism. However, a “both-and” situation should be maintained. In speaking of the good news, Paul is interacting both with the Jewish Scriptures and with the publically proclaimed ideology of Rome. In fact, these two spheres neatly coincide because the good news proclaimed in Deutero-Isaiah is a form of good news that counters the ideology and interests of the ruling élites. Furthermore, Second Temple Judaism, along with the Old Testament Jewish religion as a whole, was always deeply concerned with political matters and never understood religion as a realm distinct from the more concrete social, political, and economic areas of life. Thus, Paul faithfully follows the Jewish tradition by speaking of the good news of Jesus as that which contradicts the good news of Caesar. By doing so, he is simply reading his present imperial moment through the lenses provided by Scripture.

2.2 *Salvation, Peace, and Redemption... being saved by or from Caesar?*

The theopolitical nature of Paul’s gospel will become increasingly apparent as we flush out the contextual nuances of its various elements. As I have hinted, and will now develop, Paul’s gospel is related to the proclamation of salvation and the identification of Jesus as “savior,” as the bringer or cause of “salvation”, and as the person responsible for creating a people who are now “being saved” (cf., Ro 1.16, 5.10, 10.9-10, 34; 1 Cor 1.18, 21, 15.2; 2 Cor 2.15; 6.2; Phil 1.28; 3.20; 1 Thess 5.8-9).

However, we must observe that the Roman Empire already had a savior, a person who had brought salvation and saved the people – that person was Caesar Augustus. Augustus had been hailed as the savior of Rome, and of the entire world, because he finally brought an end to the Roman civil wars, thereby saving the Republic and all her people from a total collapse of civilization.⁸ Subsequent Julio-Claudian Emperors continued to be venerated in this way for various reasons. Thus, in Paul’s day, Nero was venerated as the “savior of the world.”⁹ Here salvation was very much a this-worldly, historical and communal event.

That this-worldly context for salvation was just as prominent in Second Temple Judaism.¹⁰ Once again, it is this Jewish context, coupled with an engagement with the dominant imperial discourse of Paul’s day that informs Paul’s use of the language of salvation (*soteria*) in his epistles. In fact, what we are presented with are competing and contradictory claims about (a) the identity of the Savior of the world; (b) the kind of peace accomplished by that Savior; and (c) the means by which that peace was accomplished. According to the dominant way of thinking, Augustus was the Savior of the world, he had brought a peace that benefitted Roman and other élites, and he had accomplished this peace by conquering, killing, or subduing all of his opponents. According to Paul, Jesus was the Savior of the world, he brought a peace for all especially, as we shall see, for all who suffered under Roman power, and he accomplished this peace by dying on a cross as a rebel publically executed by Rome. Thus, the salvation and peace of Jesus and of Caesar are “mutually exclusive.”¹¹ While the Emperor claimed the title of Savior because he killed people like Jesus in order to “secure the peace,” Paul gives Jesus the title of Savior because he gave his life in such a way that he was able to overcome the power of

⁷ Cf. James D. G. Dun, *Beginning From Jerusalem*, 164-69, 552-53; Dunn 1998, 167-69.

⁸ Cf. Lohse 1976, 198-99.

⁹ Cf. Deissmann 1978, 364. For others commenting on the overlap of language here, cf., Carter 2002, 473-74; Georgi 1991, 29; Theissen 1992, 273.

¹⁰ On this in both Judaism and Roman ideology, cf. Carter 2008, 188-89; Georgi 1991, 29.

¹¹ Gorman 2008, 102-103. Cf. Crossan and Reed 2004, 141, 149.

Rome.¹²

This political understanding is only heightened when the contemporary reader becomes aware of the overtones of the closely related language of redemption that Paul employs in this regard (cf. Ro 3.24; 1 Cor 1.30). By speaking of redemption (*apolytroxis*), Paul is employing a technical term derived from slavery laws and matters related to ransoming a captive or prisoner of war from slavery.¹³ Hence, Paul speaks of Christians as being “bought with a price” by Christ (cf. 1 Cor 6.20, 7.23). By employing this language, Paul is not stripping it of its political significance in order to make it about a spiritual thing called “sin.”¹⁴ Far from it, Paul is actually deepening the political conflict between Christ and Caesar. By using the language of *apolytroxis*, he is claiming that those who live within the *Pax Romana* actually live not as those who have been liberated, but as captives, enslaved prisoners of war – who may now find (true) salvation in Christ!

2.3 *The Crucified Christ and the Princeps – On Being the ‘First Amongst Equals’*

In talking of salvation, I noted how Paul claims that Jesus accomplished peace by dying on a cross. This form of death needs to be explored in more detail, but we should first note how Paul often refers to Jesus’ death on a cross in conjunction with the application of the title “Christ” to Jesus. Thus, for example, in 1 Cor 2.2 he writes that he “decided to know nothing among [the Corinthians] except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” and in Gal 6.14, Paul hopes that he may never boast in anything except “the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (see also 1 Cor 1.17, 23; Gal 3.1; Phil 3.18). In exploring the political nature of this we must emphasise both sides of the equation: that the Christ is *crucified*, and that the one who died on a cross was *the Christ*.

Regarding the title *ho Christos* (which is nothing more than the Greek term for the Messiah), I should emphasize that the Jewish messianic expectations were just as deeply social, political, and economic as they were religious, spiritual and metaphysical. Messianic expectations, at Paul’s time, were deeply marked by a longing for liberation from the colonizing power of Rome and from the compromised local élites – notably the Jewish Temple authorities – who were also intimately involved in oppressing the people. Thus, the Messiah was expected to be the Lord whose power and authority exceeded the power and authority of Caesar and the *Imperium Romanum*. Consequently, when Paul employs messianic rhetoric, he does so in a way that would trigger these expectations and bring the conflict between Rome and the Commonwealth of God to the attention of his readers.¹⁵ In the words of Adolf Deissmann, Paul is drawing attention to a “polemical parallelism” between Jesus Christ and the deified Emperors.¹⁶ Those who belong to Christ, who receive the title *Christou*, parallel those who belong to Caesar and receive the title *Kaisaros*. In the same way, the title *Christianoi* parallels the title *Kaisarionoi*.¹⁷ These titles and others like them – Christians, Caesarians, Herodians, and so forth – all denote various political factions defined by their allegiances to different Lords (Christ, Caesar, Herod and so forth). We miss this in our current context but the word ending here (*-iano*i in Greek, or *-ianus* in Latin), was not used for followers of a god; it was used to classify people as partisans of a political or military leader.¹⁸

The temptation here is to think that Paul is significantly redefining previous Jewish messianic

¹² Cf. Klaus Wengst 1987, ix, 2-4.

¹³ Cf. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 227-28; Sampley 1980, 2; also, to a lesser extent, Theissen 1992, 163.

¹⁴ This is what Johannes Weiss argues (1970b, 514-15) and it is also the why in which Paul’s language about “redemption” tends to be interpreted by most North American Protestants.

¹⁵ Cf. Carter 2008, 178, 182; Wright 2005, 5.

¹⁶ Deissmann 1978, 342.

¹⁷ Cf. Deissmann 1978, 377; Dunn 2009, [?]; Ziesler, 61.

¹⁸ Cf. Judge 2003, 515-517; Malina 2000, 369; Winter 2002, 70-71, 82-98.

expectations. After all, Jesus did not lead anything resembling an armed overthrow of the Roman colonization of Palestine, and the Romans only continued to dominate Israel after Jesus had come and gone. On the one hand, this is true. Yes, Paul does revise messianic expectations in order to arrive at a Christ who is killed by the Roman authorities and, yes, Paul does say that the victory Jesus ends up accomplishing runs much deeper than Rome (thus, Jesus defeats the cosmic Powers of Sin and Death). However, to posit that Paul's talk about the Messiah is then drained of any political meaning is to completely misunderstand what is happening when Paul talks about the fact that the Messiah was crucified.

The immense social and political factors associated with crucifixion are not immediately apparent to current readers of Paul's letters. It must be emphasized that crucifixion was a massive scandal in Roman society, one that refers to a "horrendous, ignominious happening reserved for the scum of society, that is, traitors and runaway slaves."¹⁹ Thus, as Neil Elliott notes, the cross was a political tool and a Roman "instrument of public terror" employed to maintain social control.²⁰ Therefore, the proclamation of a crucified man as Christ, Lord and Savior would generally be understood as some sort of foolish, shameful, perverse delusion.²¹ Basically, proclaiming a crucified Christ in Paul's day, would be like going to current day Texas and proclaiming that an Arab Muslim who belonged to Al Qaeda and died while being interrogated by American soldiers at Guantánamo was actually the true defender and leader of the free world!

Therefore, the fact that Paul does make this proclamation carries some important political implications. First of all, it reveals that the Powers-that-be – Rome and her allies – were on the wrong side.²² Despite their talk about things like peace, justice, piety, and goodness, they were actually opposed to the righteous justice of God. Instead of being life-giving, they were death-dealing.

The second important implication of this is that Jesus' death on the cross – with a terrorist (*lestes*) on either side of him – demonstrates that God and God's Messiah act in solidarity with all who are oppressed by imperial powers.²³ Thus, after his resurrection and his appointment to be the "firstborn among many" (Ro 8.28), Jesus becomes a true "first amongst equals." What is massively offensive about this assertion is that the title preferred by the Emperors from Augustus to Diocletian was not Caesar by *Princeps*. When Augustus consolidated his imperial authority over the Roman Senate and the Roman Republic, he took this title, which had been given to the leading member of the Senate – the first amongst equals – in order to support his claim that he was restoring the Republic. Thus, in passages like Phil 2.5-11 and Ro 5.6-8, Paul is arguing that the true *Princeps* is a Jewish peasant who lived and died in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, and the enemies of Rome!²⁴

4. *Exaltation and Apotheosis: The Triumph of Christ*

Having just mentioned Phil 2.5-11, it is worth looking at that passage in more detail. In particular, it is worth noting how Paul's talk of the exaltation of Jesus sounds a lot like Roman propaganda that spoke of the *apotheosis*, or deification, of deceased Emperors. After describing Christ's willingness to die as a crucified slave, Paul writes:

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name

¹⁹ Beker 1984, 206.

²⁰ Elliott 1994, 95; cf. 87-99.

²¹ Cf. Hengel 1977, xi, 1-5, 18, et passim.

²² Cf. Carter 2006, 88; Elliott 1994, 139; Gorman 2001, 5; Crossan and Reed 2004, 242.

²³ Cf. Elliott 1994, 138-39; Horsley 2004, "Introduction", 19.

²⁴ Cf. Georgi 1991, 74, 96-99.

that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Peter Oakes points out how several features of this passage mimic writings that refer to the deification of the Emperors. In both cases, the subject (a) receives universal authority, (b) as something granted to him, (c) by a competent body, (d) for a legitimate reason – often establishing peace in a situation of chaos, (e) is recognized for possessing certain crucial character traits – often moral excellence, connections to the god(s), disregard for self and peacemaking, (f) accomplishes universal submission of others, (g) is granted a high name – often the title “Lord,” and (h) the ethics of the people are then defined by the example of this leader.²⁵ Therefore, by speaking of Jesus in this way, Paul is, once again, claiming that Jesus is the one who has been rightfully granted the authority that the Caesars have inappropriately tried to claim. While the Emperors had seen equality with God as “something to be grasped” – the attitude described immediately prior in Phil 2.6 – Christ was granted that equality precisely because he did not act like the Emperors.

Further, Paul's utter disregard for the sacred nature of claims about the *apotheosis* of the Emperors is also demonstrated in 1 Thess 4.16-17. When speaking of Christ's return, Paul writes that the dead in Christ will rise into the clouds to meet the Lord as he descends, and together they will return to the earth to reign forever. In the imperial propaganda, it was the Caesars who rose from the dead, were lifted into the clouds, greeted by the gods, and transformed into gods themselves. However, Paul tells the Thessalonians that it is they – the lowly and poor members of the assembly of Jesus in Thessalonika – and their dead – likely those who had been killed by the local authorities due to their allegiance to Jesus – who will actually undergo an *apotheosis*. Not Caesar, but those persecuted by Caesar, will rise again, triumph, and become like gods.

5. *The Parousia of Christ and the Parousia of the Emperor*

Having mentioned 1 Thess 4, I want to highlight how talk of Jesus' *parousia* – the word Paul employs when he refers to the Christ's imminent presence, coming, or arrival – mimics and contests the imperial ideology of Rome (cf. 1 Cor 1.7-8, 18, 5.5; 15.23; 2 Cor 1.14; Phil 1.6, 10, 2.16; 1 Thess 2.19, 3.13; 4.15-17; 5.2, 23). In the dominant Roman discourse, the term *parousia* was applied in two overlapping ways. First of all, it was used to refer to the coming of a king or Emperor to a subject state, colony, or province. That coming was usually seen as the king or Emperor arriving as a victorious general celebrating a triumph. Secondly, it was also used to refer to the mysterious presence of a divinity that was revealed through some sort of act, notably healing.²⁶ Of course, given the close links that existed between the Emperor and the gods, and given the fact that the triumphs of the Emperors were connected to the healing of the nations, these two meanings likely blurred together in imperial ideology.

Further, when these triumphant Emperors came to visit a colonized city, the city would send out a formal delegation to meet the emperor and escort him back. The Greek term for this delegation was

²⁵ Oakes 2001, 149-74. Cf. idem 2002, 133-36; Carter 2008, 315-34, Georgi 1991, 73-74; Tellbe 255-59; Crossan and Reed 2004, 289-90.

²⁶ Cf. Crossan & Reed 2004, 167; Deissmann 1978, 368-73; Wright 2008, 128-31.

apantesin and this is precisely the word Paul employs in 1 Thess 4.17.²⁷ Thus, Paul understands those who are in Christ – both alive and dead – to be the *apantesin* designated to go out, welcome Jesus, and escort him back to the city.

Therefore, by employing the term *parousia* and concepts connected to it, Paul is doing something quite distinctive.²⁸ Specifically, he is engaging in a clever act of anti-imperial mimicry.²⁹ According to Paul, the royal and divinized Jesus is the triumphant victor who is on his way to come and visit the cities that now fall under the domain of his rule. Caesar, far from being the victor, is actually in the company of the defeated and the cities of his empire now belong to Christ. Once again we see that Christ is the reality of which Caesar is the parody.³⁰ When Paul speaks of Christ's *parousia*, he is "speaking in the name of an approaching emperor... [and] preparing the cities of a province for a coming regime change."³¹

6. *Contesting the Family of God: Different Fathers, Different Sons*

A further provocative parallel is found in Paul's many references to Jesus as the Son of God (cf. Ro 1.4, 9, 5.10, 8.3, 29, 1 Cor 1.9, 15.28; 2 Cor 1.19; Gal 2.20, 4.4-7). According to some Second Temple Jewish expectations, this "Son of God" language would have conformed to passages from the Jewish Scriptures wherein messianic hope anticipates a royal Messiah who would reestablish the Davidic kingship.³² This hope for a royal, kingly or princely Messiah is also reflected in the literary records of various streams of Second Temple Judaism.³³ Therefore, Paul is certainly drawing from Jewish messianic expectations when he applies this language to Jesus – expectations that, as I have already argued, were just as political as they were religious.

However, Paul is also contesting claims made by Roman imperial ideology when he employs this term. The Roman Empire had been inundated with a very different message one that was displayed on coins and public inscriptions, declared at public festivities and rituals, and reflected in the art and architecture of the cities. This message was that Augustus was the son of [a] god. This title – *divi filius* – was one that Augustus worked very hard to establish. He did this in three ways. First, he could appeal to the belief that his family line traced itself back to Venus. Second, Augustus became the Son of God when he had his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, officially declared a god in 42 BCE. Third, the story was also circulated that Apollo was the actual birth father of Augustus.³⁴ Consequently, as Augustus and then other Julio-Claudian Emperors were made into gods (officially after their deaths, but often sooner than that in the Ancient Near East), their heirs also became sons of gods. Therefore, John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed appropriately connect the dots when they assert that: "Christians must have understood, then, that to proclaim Jesus as Son of God was deliberately denying Caesar his highest title" and this was an act of "calculated treason."³⁵

There is also another level to this conflict about Gods and divine fathers and sons. According to the theopolitical vision of Rome, Jupiter was the Father of the gods and he reigned over the gods in the

²⁷ Cf. Witherington 1992, 158.

²⁸ Cf. Witherington 1992, 152; Dunn 1998, 295.

²⁹ Cf. Witherington 1992, 156-58, 169; Wright 2005, 54-55; and, with a slightly different focus, but maintaining the same point, Deissmann 1978, 373.

³⁰ Carter 2002, 473; Wright 2008, 131-33

³¹ Elliott in Horsley 2008, 98.

³² Cf., for example, 2 Sam 7.12-16; Ps 89.3-4; Is 9.6-7.

³³ Cf. for example, Ps. Sol. 17-18; Sib. Or. 3.652-53; 4Q161 frags 8-10 [Isaiah Peshier]; 4Q252 [Genesis Peshier]; 4Q285 frag 5.1-4; 1QSb 5.20-29 [Blessings]; 4Q504 frag 2, column 4.7-8 [Words of the Luminaries]; 1QM 5.1 [War Scroll].

³⁴ Cf. Crossan and Reed 2004, 163-64.

³⁵ Crossan and Reed 2004, 11.

same way that the Emperor – Jupiter’s special representative on earth – ruled over the nations.³⁶ Further, just as Jupiter pays special attention to Rome and gives them dominion due to their commitment to piety, law, order, and justice, so also the Emperor is the special father of the Roman people.³⁷

Thus, Jupiter functioned as the patron God of the Empire and the Emperor functioned as the broker between this patron and his clients –the Roman people. In this role, the Emperor also became an exemplary figure of pious religious commitment. Thus, Augustus engages in a major project of religious revival and reform in Rome, rebuilding old temples, restoring old priesthoods and so on.³⁸ For all these things, Augustus is awarded the position of *Pontifex Maximus* (high priest) in 12BCE, and was made a member of the four most important colleges of priests in Rome.³⁹ Indeed, the word “Augustus” is actually a title that was given to him by the Roman Senate in 27BCE. The title means “revered” and it carries both political and religious overtones, previously being employed as a title for the gods.⁴⁰

Augustus was such an exemplary figure in this regard that, in 2BCE he receives the title *pater patriae* – Father of the Fatherland. According to the *Res Gestae Divi Augustus*, the first-hand account of Augustus’ life and accomplishments that was widely circulated after his death, this was the title that brought him the greatest sense of honour. I suspect that one of the reasons that he appreciated it was because it helped him to maintain the illusion that he was not an imperial tyrant but a loving father caring for his children.⁴¹

It is interesting to then contrast this with Paul’s deployment of father language. The God of Israel is occasionally understood to be the father of all people (cf. 1 Cor 8.6, 15.24; Phil 2.11) but more often is understood to be the father of Jesus Christ (cf. Ro 15.6; 1 Cor 1.3; 2 Cor 1.2-3, 11.31; Gal 1.1) and all those who exist in Christ (cf. Ro 6.4; 8.15; 2 Cor 6.18; Gal 1.3-4, 4.6; Phil 1.2, 4.20; 1 Thess 1.3, 3.11, 3.13; Phlm 1.3). Hence, God the Father, Jesus the Christ, and the people of God who exist in Christ are declared to be the reality that is only perversely and idolatrously parodied by Jupiter the Father, the revered Emperor, and the Roman people.⁴²

7. *One Lord of All: The Summary of the Conflict between Christ and Caesar*

Finally, in a manner that incorporates many of the points already made above, we can observe how the clash between Jesus and the Emperor is ultimately reflected in Paul’s application of the title “Lord” (*Kyrios*) to Jesus. However, an appropriate amount of caution must be demonstrated here because this title was one that was widely applied within Paul’s context. Specifically, I. Howard Marshall notes five uses for the title “Lord.” It is employed: (i) as a general term of respect; (ii) as a title for people who have higher status or rank; (iii) as a title for masters and owners; (iv) as a title for political rulers, especially the emperor; and (v) as title given to the gods.⁴³ Thus, drawing on these multiple uses, James D. G. Dunn argues that the language of lordship, in general, speaks of “an asserted or acknowledged dominance and right of disposal of superior over inferior... To confess someone as one’s “lord” expressed an attitude of subserviency and a sense of belonging or devotion to the one so named.”⁴⁴ Consequently, both Marshall and Dunn (and other more Conservative or Evangelical

³⁶ Cf. Crossan 2007, 19-20; Keresztes 5-6; Ovid, *Fasti* II; Zanker, 230-34.

³⁷ Cf. Carter 2008, 236-38.

³⁸ Cf. Zanker 102-110; Eder 23, 28; Beacham in Galinsky 2005, 162.

³⁹ Cf. Zanker, 126-27; Lohse 1976, 199-200.

⁴⁰ Cf. Eder 24; Koester 1995, 293-94; Lohse 1976, 199-200; MacMullen 1981, 103; Hardin, 26.

⁴¹ Cf. Carter 2006, 32-33; Carter 2008, 236-38.

⁴² Cf. Carter 2008, 235-55.

⁴³ I. Howard Marshall 1988, 130-31.

⁴⁴ Dunn 1998, 247.

scholars) argue that Paul's application of lordship language to Jesus simply marks this general subservience and is not intended to create a sharp antithesis between Jesus and Caesar.⁴⁵ Dunn, I think, demonstrates this point in the most cautious and convincing manner. Marshall and others, however, still tend to fall into the trap of thinking of “religion” and “politics” as separate domains of existence.⁴⁶ Consequently, they end up seeing Jesus as the “religious” Lord who liberates Paul from spiritual powers, and Caesar as the “political” Lord who protects Paul from material powers.⁴⁷ Thus, Christopher Bryan argues that Paul's application of lordship language to Jesus draws from Roman rhetoric about the Emperor because Paul sees the Emperor as a positive role model!⁴⁸

Now, I think that the material that I have already covered sufficiently invalidates Bryan's position. I think it also invalidates Marshall's conclusions about “religion” and “politics” although one would, perhaps, want to spend some more time demonstrating how intimately those realms were connected... but I lack the time for that today. Dunn's position, however, merits more attention as does the initial observation of the plurality of uses for lordship language.⁴⁹

Given what we have already seen of the conflict that Paul posits between Jesus and the Emperor, I think the most grounded starting hypothesis would be one that suspects that Paul is actually employing lordship language in a counter-imperial manner – and an increasing number of scholars are defending this view.⁵⁰ Thus, to quote one example, Crossan asserts that giving a title that ultimately belonged to the Emperor to a crucified Jewish peasant “was a case of either low lampoon or high treason.”⁵¹

Of course, emphasizing this point of conflict is not to deny other overtones that are found in Paul's references to Jesus as Lord – Paul is also likely drawing on Jewish scriptural references to God as the Lord and incorporating Jesus into that divine lordship, and he is also drawing on the cultural reference to masters as lords, given that the early Christians describe themselves as slaves of Christ.⁵² However, these other points of reference are also incorporated into the understanding of the Emperor as Lord so, rather than moving us away from the conflict that this language posits, these overlaps actually contribute to it.

Deissmann, then, does a fine job of showing various areas where both the mimicry and contestation of imperial realities extends in Paul's use of this language. For example, when Paul employs the term *kyriakos* to describe that which is “the Lord's” or that which “belongs to the Lord” (cf. 1 Cor 11.20) he is drawing on the word “imperial” when it is used to describe that which belongs to Caesar (the imperial treasury, imperial service, and so on).⁵³ Paul posits an imperial reality that is different than that of Rome. Similarly, when he speaks of *apeleutheros kyriou* – freedmen of the Lord (cf. 1 Cor 7.22) – he is employing a term that commonly referred to people who had been freed by the

⁴⁵ Marshall 1988, 132-33, 144-45; Dunn 1988, 247; Dunn 2009, 553.

⁴⁶ Schnabel exhibits a similar caution when he notes that, on one hand, Paul's proclamation of the lordship of Jesus affected claims made by the emperor. On the other hand, however, Schnabel does not think Paul was being deliberately provocative, although he “was unafraid to use formulations that could be misunderstood in ways that were potentially dangerous” (Schnabel 1483). Wayne Meeks also offers a position comparable to Dunn's (cf. Meeks 1993, 168).

⁴⁷ Cf. Marshall 1998, 133; Schreiner 162-63. For others who stress that lordship language is applied to Jesus in order to emphasize a religious element – the deity of Christ – cf. Davies 1984, 206; Tenney 113, Ziesler 34, Fredriksen 139-41; Witherington 1992, 164; Weiss 1970b, 457-60.

⁴⁸ Cf. Bryan 82-85, 91.

⁴⁹ After all, Dunn himself notes that the proclamation of Jesus as Lord “was likely to send a shiver up and down many a spine, since it could so easily be represented as in direct antithesis to the loyalty owed to the emperor.” Dunn 2009, 430.

⁵⁰ Cf. Deissmann 1978, 349-51, 355; Gorman 2008, 102; Wright 2000, 164-70.

⁵¹ Crossan in Horsley 2008, 73.

⁵² Cf. Deissmann 1978, 351; Kummel 1973, 158-59; W. Barclay, 189.

⁵³ Deissmann 1978, 357-58.

Emperor.⁵⁴ Finally, when Paul talks of Jesus returning to gain payment from the nations on the “day of the Lord” (cf. 1 Cor 1.8, 5.5; 2 Cor 1.14; 1 Thess 5.2), it is interesting to note that the imperial calendar had one such day set aside each month – called *Sebaste*, the Greek word for Augustus – when payments were regularly made.⁵⁵ Thus, we see competing days of competing lords, when different reckonings take place.

However, the deployment of lordship language that most convincingly demonstrates that Paul is actually contesting claims made by the Emperor are the references that he makes to Jesus as the *only* Lord or as the Lord *of all*. Thus, in Ro 10.9-12, in a statement that cannot help but be seditious, Paul asserts that:

if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

Similarly, in 1 Cor 8.5-6, Paul writes:

Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords— yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Finally, it is worth repeating the lordship language that we have already heard in Phil 2.9-11:

Therefore God also highly exalted [Jesus] and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

By making these statements Paul has moved from making potentially provocative claims to engaging in outright treason. There is one universal Lord over all – Jesus, not Caesar – and one day every person in heaven or on earth – from the deified Augustus to the regnant Nero – will bend their knees to this state-executed slave and declare their submission to him.

8. *Paul the Apostle: God's Diplomat to the Nations*

I can now turn from Paul's understanding of Jesus to Paul's understanding of himself. Here, I would like to draw attention to the title “apostle” which is very clearly the title Paul most favours for himself. Hence, he regularly opens his letters by referring to himself as one who has been called to be an *apostolos Christou* – and apostle of Christ (cf. Ro 1.1; 1 Cor 1.1; 2 Cor 1.1; Gal 1.1). However, what exactly does it mean to be an “apostle”? While Christian traditions have come up with various definitions of the word, it is worth recalling that Paul does not simply make up this title. He draws on a term that already carried certain cultural and political meanings.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 377.

⁵⁵ Deissmann makes this observation about the imperial calendar but he does so in the context of Paul's talk about setting aside money for the Collection he is gathering for the poor in Jerusalem (Deissmann 1978, 361; cf. 1 Cor 16.1-2). However, Paul does not actually employ the term “the day of the Lord” in that passage but speaks of collecting money on “the first day of the week.” Granted, this day, came to be called “the Lord's day” but the deployment of that term in Paul's epistles tends to be exclusively focused on that day of the *parousia*.

Within Paul's context, the word *apostolos* refers to “one sent out” a “delegate, envoy, messenger, [or] authorized emissary.”⁵⁶ The idea, then, is that this envoy is invested with a unique status and shares in the authority of the party that has commissioned and sent out that representative.⁵⁷ This makes the political overtones more apparent. Paul is a “diplomatic herald” representing the Commonwealth of God to the nations.⁵⁸

The other titles he employs also further this connection. In 2 Cor 5.20, Paul refers to himself as an “ambassador [*presbeuomen*] for Christ” and this is a term also used for the ambassadors of Caesar.⁵⁹ Likewise, in 2 Cor 11.23, he speaks of the apostles as being “ministers” of Christ. This term, *diakonoi*, parallels the imperial notion of the ministers of Caesar and, like the term *apostolos*, the title *diakonos* contains the missional, military, and political overtones of being a messenger, herald or envoy.⁶⁰

Now, if Paul was simply coming as a diplomat to offer allegiance to Rome on Christ's behalf, there would be nothing wrong with him employing this language. However, as the discussion above makes clear, Paul was not doing anything like that. In fact, he was doing the opposite – he went to Rome proclaiming Jesus as the one true Lord, to whom Caesar owed allegiance. Not only this, but he went into Roman occupied territory – to nations and cities vanquished by Rome – and declared the gospel of Jesus in those places.

This is what it meant for Paul to be God's apostle *to the Gentiles* (cf. Ro 3.29, 11.13, 15.9-11; Gal 1.16, 2.8, 3.7-8). As made apparent in Ro 1.5, Paul believed that he has been commissioned by Jesus Christ to “bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles.” Once again, however, our North American Protestant ears are not properly attuned to understand what Paul means by this. We have tended to understand Paul's mission to the Gentiles to be an overcoming of the exclusive ethnocentrism of Judaism (a perspective that has been tainted by centuries of anti-Semitism). This motif, then, is generally applied today in order to address racism. Now, there is certainly some truth in this approach – the coming of the Messiah and the outpouring of the eschatological Spirit certainly did redefine the boundaries that previously existed around the people of God.

That said, this popular Protestant reading of Paul's commission to go to “the Gentiles” misses the broader point. In an important work, Davina Lopez reminds contemporary readers that, within Paul's context, the term *ta ethnes* – which has been translated as “the Gentiles” in our English bibles – is more frequently understood to mean “the nations”.⁶¹ This more political meaning would have been the way in which Paul's original readers would have understood it. Thus, Ro 1.5 is probably more accurately translated as saying that Paul was commissioned by Lord Jesus Christ to “bring about the obedience of faith among all the *nations*.”

This is a problem from the perspective of Rome. The Emperor has already accomplished the obedience of faith among all the nations by bringing peace through conquest and pacification. That peace was now maintained through the force of the law (which, occasionally, had to crucify some people in order to remind the general public to faithfully obey Rome and her elite allies). Over against this, Paul goes to the nations conquered by Rome and argues that they should become incorporated into the Commonwealth of God – wherein peace came about through grace, justice-making and the international solidarity of the crucified and the vanquished.⁶² In this way, Paul is extending the counter-imperial movement begun by Christ by planting revolutionary cells at key points within the

⁵⁶ Dunn 2009, 531.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 531-32, 536-39.

⁵⁸ A term taken from Elliott in Horsley 2008, 98.

⁵⁹ Cf. Deissmann 1978, 374.

⁶⁰ Cf. Deissmann 1978., 376; Georgi 1991, 27-32.

⁶¹ Lopez, 17-25. Elliott and Carter both hint at this prior to Lopez, but it is her book that really works hard to demonstrate this point (cf. Elliott in Horsley 2008, 99; Carter 2008, 79-81).

⁶² Cf. Lopez, 55, 146-49, 166-68, *et passim*.

9. *Ekklesiai: Beachheads of the Commonwealth of God*

This final remark needs to be explored in more detail. To begin this task, I would like to look at the language Paul employs in relation to the “churches” that he was planting across Asia Minor. The first thing to realize is that Paul never employs the word “church” when he spoke about these groups. *Ekklesia* is the word that Paul employs when speaking of groups of Jesus followers that gathered at various places throughout the Empire. This word carries multiple connotations within its context.

First of all, the most common reference point for this word in the Graeco-Roman world was the civic gathering of the appropriate citizens of any given city. This *ekklesia* was convened in order to make official economic, legal, and political decisions.⁶⁴ Thus, upon hearing the word *ekklesia*, the non-Judaean recipients of Paul's letters would likely think first and foremost of this political assembly.

Secondly, however, this term also resonates with the language of the Septuagint, which employs the term *ekklesia* in order to refer to “the Assembly of Yhwh.”⁶⁵ Thus, what makes the gathering of Jesus followers distinct from the gathering of the civic assembly is that the Jesus followers – like Israel before them – are gathered together by God or Christ⁶⁶ Some then, appeal to this observation in order to mitigate the potential political implications of Paul's use of this term. Hence, Johannes Weiss argues that the assemblies of those in Christ are multinational but not political entities, and James Dunn argues that Paul's Jewish talk in this regard is more theological than political.⁶⁷

However, I believe that this conclusion is incorrect and remains too deeply rooted in the modern divide between “religion” and “politics.” The fact is that, within the Jewish Scriptures, the assembly of Yhwh was always understood as a theopolitical entity. Israel was never simply a spiritual community; it was always an assembly with laws and values that governed all the concrete and material spheres of life. Therefore, to note that Paul's use of the term *ekklesia* is likely influenced by the deployment of that term in the Septuagint does not mitigate the political overtones of that word in any way.

Once again, I think we are faced with a “both-and” situation. I believe that Paul employs the word *ekklesia* in order to connect the Assemblies of Jesus to both of the closely related Graeco-Roman and Jewish definitions. The key differences, then, are that the social elites convene the Graeco-Roman assembly, Yhwh convenes the ethnic assembly of Israel, and the far more open assemblies of Jesus are convened by Christ and the Spirit. Each one of these assemblies, however, is both a political and theological entity.

However, the identity of the one gathering the assembly has profound implications for the identities of those gathered and for their relationships with others. On the one hand, those who joined the *ekklesia* of Jesus entered into a new ambiguous relationship to their home cities and to the Empire more broadly.⁶⁸ On the other hand, those outside the assemblies of Jesus, particularly the ruling Powers but also others who were trying to gain favour with them, would likely look on these *ekklesiai* with hostility.⁶⁹ Rome did not look kindly on anything that came close to resembling an alternative order or political body. Any organization of that sort was illegal and would be forcefully crushed.

Yet, Paul was likely building just such a body. Thus, in 1 Cor 6.1-11, he advises against accessing the legal system that Roman had established. He writes:

⁶³ Cf. Badiou, [?], Žižek, [?]

⁶⁴ Cf. Deissmann 1978, 112; Georgi 1991, 59; Dunn 2009, 549-50, 599; Dunn 2001, 121-22.

⁶⁵ Cf. Weiss 1970b, 616-18; Goguel 1964b, 24-25; Witherington, 1992, 79, 81-82; Dunn 2009, 552, 600; Dunn 2001, 121-22; Pate 165-66.

⁶⁶ Cf. Goguel 1964b, 27; Weiss 1970b, 615-616.; Witherington 1992, 79-80.

⁶⁷ Weiss 1970b, 618; Dunn 2009, 600.

⁶⁸ Cf. Meeks, 1993, 45.

⁶⁹ Cf. Meeks 1983, 183-84.

When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to be judged by those who are unrighteous and unjust [*adikon*], instead of taking it before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?

Instead, Paul argues that the *ekklesia* should establish its own judges and emphasizes that those who are *adikon*, like the official judges just mentioned, have no place in the Commonwealth of God or in the body of Christ. Indeed, when Paul applies the idea of a “body” to the assemblies of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 12.12-27), he is employing a metaphor that was consistently and primarily used in political discourse.⁷⁰ This, then, establishes a conflict between the body of Christ and the political body of the Empire. A similar conflict occurs when Paul applies the language of citizenship to the members of his assemblies and describes them as “citizens [*politeuma*] of heaven” in Phil 3.20. In this passage, it is apparent that the followers of Jesus owe their allegiance to the Commonwealth of God, not to the cities of Rome, and it is that allegiance to God that is to dictate their behaviour (in the same way that the concept of citizenship in Roman thought also carried certain implications for how one acted).⁷¹

Of course, one could postulate that Paul's understanding of these assemblies is simply one that mimics diasporic Judaism, which had its own assemblies (Synagogues). These assemblies also appointed representatives who made legal judgments over the members of each local community. However, that Paul is doing something different and much more dangerous becomes apparent when we recall that he was very quickly thrown out of the Synagogues he visited. Not only that, but he and the other followers of Jesus were subsequently persecuted – sometimes quite violently – by the diasporic Jewish communities. This rejection and persecution occurred, not because Paul was preaching “grace not works” but because Paul was teaching a radical form of Jewish messianism.

The situation of the diasporic Jewish communities was already precarious. Anti-Jewish riots, murders, and robberies were not uncommon in the Roman world and the ruling authorities sometimes officially commanded these acts and other times turned a blind eye to them. Therefore, the last thing a Jewish community needed was the presence of a group of people like Paul who talked about Jesus in the ways I have mentioned. Thus, the Jewish-based persecution that Paul encountered arose because Paul's life and gospel jeopardized the hard-fought and precarious safety that the Jewish communities experienced. This, by the way, is why a good number of the members of the assemblies Paul helped to found were tempted to adopt more Jewish beliefs and practices (like circumcision). If the early Christians stood out as a separate entity from the Jewish community, then they would have fallen outside of the somewhat fragile protection offered to the Jews and would have been attacked by the Roman authorities as an illicit gathering.⁷²

Therefore, I think that it is accurate to describe Paul's *ekklesiai* as an international network that was seeking to participate in God's newly established political order.⁷³ Richard Horsley and Neil Silberman describe it well. “Paul,” they write, “was beginning to forge an empire-wide movement of suffering and disenfranchised people who dreamed of being the beneficiaries, not the victims, of an all-powerful emperor.”⁷⁴

10. *This Present Age and its Evil and Foolish Rulers*

⁷⁰ Cf. R. Grant, 36-37.

⁷¹ Cf. Bockmuehl, 139; Oakes 2002, 138; Tellbe, 239-43; Theissen 1992, 273.

⁷² For more on this paragraph cf., Frederikson 153-56; Horsley and Silberman 120-22; Munck 318-19; Tellbe 63-77; Theissen 2003, 62-63; Taubes 2004, 17; Dunn 2009, 642; Dunn 2009, 172-73, 647-48.

⁷³ Gorman 2001, 356-60; Gorman 2004, 108-109; Horsley 1997, “General Introduction”, 8.

⁷⁴ Horsley and Silberman, 158; cf. Badiou 20-21.

This struggle is also highlighted in Paul's talk about this age [*aionos*]. For example, in Gal 1.3-4, he writes that “the Lord Jesus Christ” has “set us free from the present evil age” and in 1 Cor 4.4, he asserts that “the god of this age” has blinded those who do not believe in Christ. Thus, he explains in 1 Cor 2.6-8:

among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

Now, North American Protestants are generally taught to hear this “age” language as a reference to the general history of humanity from the point of an initial “fall” to the point of the second coming of Jesus. Hence, the god and rulers of this age tend to be defined as spiritual entities – things like Satan, Sin, Death, the Flesh and the Law understood as works-righteousness – and end up lacking any specifically political point of reference.

However, while I do not wish to deny that Paul's reflections about “this age” have implications for most ages in history, and while I agree that God in Jesus does defeat the Powers of Sin and Death, I think that it makes better sense of Paul to hear this language as a reference to the present moment of subjugation to the foolish and evil rulers of the Roman Empire.⁷⁵ It is these *historical and political entities* who crucified Jesus, who are blind and blinding, and who make this present age into an age defined by evil, injustice, and ultimately Death. Indeed, by defeating Death, Jesus defeats these political rulers because they are simply the historical agents who operate in its service. Therefore, by becoming incorporated into Jesus, the members of Paul's assemblies have not only been liberated from Sin and Death – they have equally been liberated from the evil age of Empire.

It would be hard for Paul’s original audiences to miss the offense of his statements in this regard because the Roman imperial propaganda also had a great deal to say about this present age. According to Rome this age was anything but evil – it was actually the moment when the Golden Age was, once again, dawning. To mark this momentous event, Augustus had held the *Ludi Saeculares*, the Secular Games – or Games of the New Century – and these Games mark the end of the old age and the beginning of the Golden Age.⁷⁶ An Age that was defined by peace, fertility, and rest – it was very good.

Inscriptions found in Asia Minor show how closely related this New Age is to the Emperor. In a move that reorients the calendar so that the New Year begins on the birthday of Augustus, Fabius Paullus Maximus writes:

(It is difficult to tell) whether the birthday of the most divine Caesar is something of greater pleasure or benefit, which we could rightly accept to be equivalent to the beginning of all times; and he restored, if not to nature, at least to serviceability, every form, which was falling away and had carried over into misfortune; and he has given a different look to the whole world, which gladly would have accepted destruction had not Caesar been for the common good of all things.⁷⁷

That inscription dates from 29BCE. The following inscription dates from 9 BCE. It was issued by the Asian league of cities and directly comments on the one just quoted. It was posted in the imperial sanctuary in every major city and it goes as such:

⁷⁵ Cf. Elliott 1994, 111-112.

⁷⁶ Cf. Beacham in Galinsky 2005, 162; Georgi 1997, 36-41; Zanker 167-68, 183-92; Hardin 34-36.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Hardin, 32.

Since the Providence that has [divinely] ordained our life, having harnessed her energy and liberality, has brought to life the most perfect good, Augustus, whom she filled with virtue for the service of mankind, giving him, as it were, to us and our descendents a savior, he who brings an end to war and will order [peace], Caesar, who by his [epiphany] surpassed the hopes of all those who anticipated [good news] not only [outstripping the benefactors] coming before him, but also leaving no hope of greater benefaction in the future; (And since) the [birthday] of the god initiated to the world the good news resulting in him... (And since) Paullus Fabius Maximus... has invented an honor for Augustus that now has been unknown to the Greeks – to begin times from his birthday – for that reason, with good fortune and safety, the Greeks of Asia have decided in all the cities to begin the New Year with the 23rd September, which is the birthday of Augustus.⁷⁸

In this way, the offensive nature of Paul's talk about this present evil age becomes apparent. However, while this may be seditious language to the authorities, Paul is only revealing that which was widely known throughout the territories conquered by Rome: the Golden Age was only golden for the triumphant and their allies – for everybody else it was something quite different.⁷⁹

11. *Paul and the Law: The Anarchic Rupture of the Nomos by the Grace and Justice of God*

At this point, I would like to turn to the topic that has dominated Protestant readings of Paul since Luther: the relationship that exists between Paul and the Law. Engaging this topic will require me to comment on the context of Paul's language about "righteousness" or "justice," given that Paul's discussion about those matters is a part of his reflections on the Law. Basically, I would like to take up the suggestion that Paul is often referring to the *Roman* law when he speaks of *ho nomos* (the law) and not to the Jewish law.⁸⁰ It is this Roman law that is ruptured and dethroned by the anarchy of grace encountered in Jesus and his assemblies.

Reading Paul's references to *ho nomos* in this way makes good historical sense on at least two counts. First of all, it makes sense for the original recipients of Paul's letters – non-Jewish people living at Rome or Corinth or wherever – to have the Roman law be the first thing that would come to mind when this topic was raised. Secondly, it also makes good sense of Paul as a first-century Jew and a member of a messianic Jewish movement. Paul believes that he is following in the footsteps of Jesus and the prophets within the story of Israel. However, Jesus and the prophets did not exist against the Mosaic law; rather, they sought to *fulfill* it. Thus, by fitting into this trajectory, Paul is not massively opposed to the Jewish law. Far from it, he speaks approvingly of that law as it is interpreted and fulfilled through Christ and the Spirit. This is the "law of love" (ref.), the "law of faith" (ref.), the "law of Christ" (ref.) or "the law of the Spirit of life" (Ro 8.2). Of course, Paul is on contested ground in his understanding of precisely how the coming of Christ and the Spirit reinterprets the Law of Moses, but the law that Paul attacks most vociferously is the Roman legal system. That is the Law of Sin and of Death (Ro 8.2).

Here it is worth filling out our picture of the imperial understanding of Roman law. The Romans believed in manifest destiny. They believed that they had been divinely appointed to rule the nations because of their religious piety and their justice system. They believed that the Greeks had been fated to bring culture to the world and they, the Romans, were elected and predestined to bring justice and order. This is an order that, as we have already seen, brings new life and restoration to all

⁷⁸ Quoted in Hardin 32-33.

⁷⁹ Cf. Wengst 1987, 10-22; Carter 2008, 204-208.

⁸⁰ Cf. Jennings, 7 et passim; Taubes 2004, 23-24.

beings in the world – whether plant, animal, or human. Thus, the gods chose the Romans to be rulers and vindicated their efforts in that regard, providing them victory in war, because the Romans were especially pious and just. The *dikaiosyne theou*, the righteous justice of Jupiter, is now revealed through the universal implementation of Roman law (which is often portrayed as Jupiter's eagle). To rebel against or even contest this order, was then taken as evidence of one's own injustice and unrighteousness. Such unjust and impious rebels (people like Jesus) were then appropriately punished.⁸¹

This, of course, is the official party line. Others who were not directly benefiting from Roman rule, and who were actually suffering under it, might be more inclined to see this belief about Roman destiny, piety, justice, and law, as nothing more than a moral and ideological tool employed by the powerful in order to maintain and strengthen their power at the expense of others. Following Giorgio Agamben, one can see how this becomes one of the means by which the beneficiaries of the law annex lawlessness (violence, rape, exploitation and so on) to themselves.⁸² Talk of justice and the law, in the Roman context, becomes a rationale or mask covering over the brutal exercise of power.⁸³

Read in light of this, Paul's talk about grace and the righteous justice of God is explosive. Consider the following words from one of his most famous passages, Ro 3.21-24:

But now, apart from the law [*ho nomos*], the righteous justice of God [*dikaiosyne theou*] has been manifested, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteous justice of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe... they are now freely made just and righteous [*dikaioymenoi*] by his grace, through the redemption [*apolytroseos*] that is in Christ Jesus.

Here Paul is speaking of two laws: the righteous justice of God comes apart from the Roman law but is attested to by the Jewish law and prophets. Thus, righteousness and justice do not come through Roman rule, they come through the rule of one crucified by Rome.

By writing in this way and by emphasizing the belief that righteousness and justice are created through the grace of God, Paul distances the notion of justice from notions of law or legality. This then undermines and contests Roman claims about the sacred and just nature of their laws. By saying that the law cannot achieve justice, Paul is saying that the Powers-that-be are incapable of producing a just order to life.⁸⁴ Theodore Jennings summarizes this well: “justice necessarily exceeds, questions, or even destabilizes law even though justice also is the provocation of law and its (provisional) legitimation.”⁸⁵ Or, as Michael Gorman more emphatically suggests: God's saving and restorative justice counters and exposes the Roman way of justice as violent injustice.⁸⁶

Thus, Paul's language of grace is the ultimate anarchic delegitimation of any rule of law. By establishing an economics of grace, expressed in the giving of gifts, Paul counters the Roman economics of law, which caused the nations to be forever indebted to Rome for giving this “gift” to the world.⁸⁷

Furthermore, God's gracious gift of justice-beyond-the-law also results in a process of

⁸¹ For some who develop these thoughts cf. Brunt 25-29; Carter 2006, 7; Crossan 2007, 16-18; Carter 2008, 57-58; Dewey 1996, 104-105; Jeffers 295; Carter 2006, 83-85; Carter 2008, 292-93; Kahl, *passim*; Carter 2002, 462-63.

⁸² Cf. Griffiths in Harink 2010, 182. See also Benjamin's reflections on the law in the regard as mediated by Poettcker in Harink 2010, 103-108.

⁸³ Cf. Elliott 2008, 59; Brunt 31-35; Wengst 1987, 37-40; Winter 2002, 67; Elliott in Harink 2010, 141; Georgi, 1991,

101.

⁸⁴ Cf. Miranda, 169-73, 183-91; Jennings 20-22, 29-30.

⁸⁵ Jennings, 19.

⁸⁶ Gorman 2008, 119-20.

⁸⁷ Cf. Jennings 50-52, 85-91.

justification – a process that transforms people into truly righteous and just agents of the Commonwealth of God. Justification is not simply about the spiritual or religious state of a person, it is about the restoration of right relationships between people and God, between people and other people, and between all the elements of the *cosmos*.⁸⁸ Hence, this process of justice-ification is as down-to-earth and universal as the Roman vision of justice-making. In their concrete relationships with one another and with God, the members of the assemblies of Jesus are, quite literally, concretely, and subversively becoming the *dikaiosyne theou* (cf. 2 Cor 5.21).

12. Conclusion: To Carry the Marks of Jesus Branded on One's Body

This leads us to one final theme that plays a prominent role in all of Paul's letters. This is the theme of suffering. What becomes evident from a multitude of references is that suffering, according to Paul, is a crucial element of the identity of those who are "in Christ." It is a sign of membership for those who belong to the assemblies of Jesus.⁸⁹ Further, as with other areas of Christian discipleship, Paul clearly sees himself as an example of what it means to follow Jesus in this regard. Thus, in passages like Phil 3.1-11 or 1 Cor 11.23-28, he demonstrates his own cruciformity – his actual participation in the sufferings of Christ – as a model to be emulated by others.⁹⁰

Now, I think that North American Protestants are accustomed to reading this talk of suffering as referring to the general sufferings one experiences in life. Some of the relevant passages certainly seem to imply this conclusion. In Ro 8.17-23, Paul writes about the groaning of creation, and in 2 Cor 4.7, 16-18, he talks about the outer nature that wastes away and possessing treasures in jars of clay. Thus, many take Paul's references to suffering to be a part of Christian existence in a world that is passing away, or as a conflict between the internal and external aspects of living new life within a world still dominated by death. According to this perspective, this is suffering understood as a part of the general human experience, and it is not associated with anything political.⁹¹

However, what becomes clear when we look in more detail at the bulk of Paul's references to this theme (let alone the stories told about Paul in Acts), is that Paul's sufferings are most often related to social, economic, and political conflicts.⁹² In 2 Cor 4, the chapter just quoted, Paul doesn't just speak about general suffering, he speaks about being "persecuted." Similarly, in Ro 8.35-39, the other chapter quoted, he concludes by speaking about being "persecuted" and being threatened by "the sword" of the rulers and Powers, who actually seem to be "slaughtering" some of those who follow Jesus. Similar references to "persecution" are made in 1 Thess 1.6, and 2.2, 14-16. Other passages then expand on this. In 1 Cor 4.9-13, Paul speaks of being "beaten," "persecuted," and living "as though sentenced to death" (an ominous reference, given that Paul actually was sentenced to death not long thereafter). In 2 Cor 1.8-10, he writes about being "utterly, unbearably crushed" in Asia by a "deadly peril" that also threatened him with "the sentence of death." In Phil 1.13-14 and Phlm 1.9-10, he speaks of being imprisoned and guarded by Roman soldiers. However, 2 Cor 11.21-28 is probably the most detailed list of his sufferings. In that passage he writes:

Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods.

⁸⁸ Cf. Crossan and Reed 2004, 382-84; Gorman 2008, 116-117; Harink 56, 59-60; Theissen 2003, 87; Jennings 43

⁸⁹ Cf. Remus, 431; Deissmann 1923, 234-35, 240; Gorman 2008, 25-26; Roetzel 2003, 30-33; Sampley 1991, 30-31; Walsh & Keesmaat, 220-33.

⁹⁰ Cf. Elias 77-79; Gorman 2001, 199-209.

⁹¹ Cf. Bultmann 1952, 349; Dunn 1998, 496; Dunn 2009, 848-49; Keck, 109, 121; MacDonald, 79; Schriener 102.

⁹² Cf. Gorman 2001, 146-52; Cousar 1996, 133, 140

Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked...

...In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas set a guard on the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.

A few things are worth emphasizing here. First, the forty lashes minus one that Paul received would have been issued by leaders of Jewish Synagogues – leaders who fulfilled not only religious, but also social and political roles. Second, being “beaten with rods” was a punishment that was meted out by the local civic and political authorities who were allied with Rome, as are the imprisonments, as well as the other floggings Paul mentions.

Therefore, while I do not wish to deny that Paul sometimes does talk about the general sufferings of life it is clear that the role assigned to the persecution he faces from the theopolitical Powers is much more important. This economic and political root of Paul’s sufferings is then verified by the account Luke provides in Acts where Paul is charged with (a) spreading an *illegal* and *un-Roman* religion in Phillipi; (b) damaging *civic pride* in Ephesus; (c) acting in ways *contrary to the decrees of Caesar* in Thessalonika; (d) spreading a form of worship that is *contrary to the law* in Corinth; and, finally, (e) he is accused of *creating strife* in Jewish communities all throughout the Empire, when he is brought before Felix.⁹³ Therefore, it should be clear that the brand marks of Christ that Paul carries on his body (cf. Gal 6.12) are the marks and disabilities that resulted from punishments inflicted by the legal authorities. Christ was scarred by Rome and Jerusalem – by the political, religious and economic Powers – and so was Paul.

Further, even Paul’s talk about more general sufferings, are references to the general sufferings experienced by those who are marginalized, exploited and oppressed. This is apparent in his references to hunger, thirst, nakedness, homelessness, hard work, sleeplessness, being vulnerable to being attacked by bandits, and being vulnerable to the elements. These are not the sufferings of wealthy high-status people; they are the sufferings of the poor. Therefore, the sufferings experienced by those in Christ are sufferings that Paul and others choose to enter into, in solidarity with all others who are persecuted, not only by the powers of Sin and Death, but also by the Powers of Empire.⁹⁴

Of course, the legitimate observation that moments of persecution arose sporadically in local communal conflicts – and did not arise from a systematic State-sponsored attack on the early followers of Jesus – does not take away from the political nature of any of this. The fact is that the early followers of Jesus were such a small minority, and were so closely linked with the Jewish communities, that they would have drawn next to no attention from authorities outside of their localities.⁹⁵ But to see the local as apolitical is erroneous.⁹⁶ It is these local authorities who would first be aware of the seditious and potentially revolutionary nature of the *Christianoi*, whose non-compliance with the regular theopolitical activities related to the imperial cult would have jeopardized the safety and reputation of an entire city.⁹⁷

Furthermore, when members of the assemblies of Jesus finally do gain the attention of the Roman élite, they are perceived to be a public menace and the type of people likely to support an

⁹³ Cf. Jeffers, 161-67; Dunn 2009, 677-80.

⁹⁴ Cf. Wrigh’s poignant words in relation to this theme in 1992, 129-30; and 1993, 256.

⁹⁵ Cf. Hopkins, 84, 92, 111; Remus 431-52;

⁹⁶ Cf. Malherbe 1983, 21-22; Tenney, 124-26, 292; Judge 2008, 44-52.

⁹⁷ Cf. Price 122-23; Tellbe 72-73; Malina 2000, 384-85.

insurrection or revolt.⁹⁸ This, I think, is actually an accurate perception. Not only did the piety of the *Christianoi* deviate from the form of piety that the Romans believed was necessary for maintaining peace with the gods and security with others, but the “good news” that Paul proclaimed – in both word and deed – clearly undercut any of the legitimacy claimed by Caesar.⁹⁹ No wonder, then, that when Paul finally does make it to Rome, he is executed by imperial decree. Either beheaded or caught up with countless others in the Neronian persecution that followed the fire of Rome in 64CE.

Thus, Paul ends up faithfully following Jesus, Stephen and others, and is executed at the command of the political authorities. The rest of the apostles, of course, will follow shortly thereafter. So, when all the various élites – the social, economic, and theopolitical Powers – are united in wiping out all the leaders of a movement, you would be foolish to conclude that that movement was strictly “religious” or “spiritual.” The political explanation I have provided here makes much better sense of what actually happened to Paul.

3. How Things Play Out on the Ground: The Pauline Collection and the Practice of Economic Mutualism

I would now like to move from our discussion of terms and themes in Paul's letters in order to look at one of the most important ways in which these things actually express themselves in the lived lives of Paul and the assemblies of Jesus. Here I would like to explore Paul's efforts to coordinate a financial collection for the poor members of the assembly who gathered in Jerusalem. This is actually one of the most important efforts undertaken by Paul – we see him referring to it in numerous letters (Gal 2.10, 1 Cor 16.1-4, 2 Cor 8.1-9.15, and Ro 15.25-32), covering almost the entire span of his public work as an Apostle. Hence, it obviously holds great significance for him. As Dunn writes, “the collection sums up to a unique degree the ways in which Paul's theology, missionary work, and pastoral concern held together as a single whole.”¹⁰⁰ Or, as N. T. Wright says, the collection is the primary concrete manifestation of what it means to live as God's new humanity.¹⁰¹

Here it is interesting to note how something that was such a large preoccupation for Paul has not gained anything close to the same degree of significance for contemporary Christian readers or interpreters of his letters. I suspect that this is because a focus upon the “spiritual” content of Paul's letters, coupled with the neglect of his actual economic practices, is conducive to domesticating Paul and allying him with contemporary middle-class ways of life. However, Paul does not let us off the hook so easily. As I intend to argue, his efforts to coordinate this collection are one key example of the anarchic economy of grace he was seeking to pursue – an economy defined by the practice of economic mutualism in solidarity with the poor, in resistance to the Powers, and offering liberation to all, especially those whose lives were being stolen from them.

1. Economic Mutualism as More-than Rhetorical Solidarity

Beginning with the principle of solidarity, the first thing to be emphasized is that Paul is engaging in a financial collection for “the poor” in Jerusalem (cf. Gal 2.10; 2 Cor 8.13-15, 9.9-12; Ro 15.26). Here some have tried to undercut the importance of this by suggesting that the term “the poor” is actually just a gloss referring to the members of the assembly of Jesus, regardless of their economic status. However, this position – generally championed by Conservative or Evangelical scholars – has

⁹⁸ Cf. Dunn 2009, 60; Jeffers, 109; Hopkins, 78, 81; Walsh & Keesmaat, 55; Georgi 1991, 103-104.

⁹⁹ Cf. Remus, 436-37.

¹⁰⁰ Dunn 1998, 707; cf. 706-707; Dunn 20089, 940-44. Also Georgi 1965, 15; Nickle, 100; Thompson, 15; Downs in Longenecker, 151.

¹⁰¹ Wright 2005, 165-67.

now been soundly refuted. When Paul talks about “the poor,” he is referring to those who are living at, or below, the subsistence level.¹⁰² These were people who would be unsure of whether or not they would have daily food to eat.

Regarding this collection, Paul is following the trajectory established by certain traditions found within Second Temple Judaism. In 2 Cor 8.13-14, his injunction that “those who have should help those who are in need” is a reference to Ex 16.18 and the practice of gathering manna in the wilderness. According to that practice, it was inappropriate to gather anything more than one needed to live and any surplus was to be given to meeting the needs of others.¹⁰³ Thus, the Torah that developed out of this experience organized a system of relief for the needy, exemplified in tithes that were gathered for the poor and the (perhaps untested) practice of Jubilee.¹⁰⁴ Thus, unlike the Roman system of benefaction, the Jewish system of almsgiving was directed exclusively towards those who were genuinely poor, without any thought of repayment or reward (except from God). It is *only* in reference to this practice that Paul employs the term “equality” (*isotes*).¹⁰⁵ Equality is not some vague idea about the spiritual standing everybody has before God. For Paul, equality is the concrete practice of economic mutuality.

Further, unlike the Roman belief that people lived within an economy of scarcity, defined by limited goods, the injunction to share anything that one has beyond that which meets one's basic needs is rooted in an economy of abundance based upon the astounding generosity of God.¹⁰⁶ Note, then how this reverses current expressions of the “prosperity gospel”: affirming God's abundant generosity does not lead a person to become rich, it leads a person to give away his or her riches and become poor because God will continue to provide! This moves any talk of solidarity beyond the realm of the rhetoric employed by those who condescend to give alms occasionally. Here solidarity means true economic mutualism: giving one's surplus to meet another's deficit, in such a way that everyone becomes level with everyone else. Thus, those who have become like those who have-not, and those who have-not are able to survive.

Furthermore, unlike other forms of charity or benefaction, Paul's collection is a collection gathered by the poor (in Asia Minor) for the poor (in Jerusalem). Money is now exchanged between equals and peers, not between patrons and clients, or creditors and debtors.¹⁰⁷ This is a truly marvelous undertaking. Poor people, like those in Macedonia (cf. 2 Cor 8.1-2.), slowly gathered the tiny surplus they were able to accumulate, to provide for poor people in Jerusalem who were then experiencing a famine. Thus, when similar disasters occurred at other locations, the assemblies of Jesus would be able to band together once again, to continually meet the needs that arose (cf. 2 Cor 8.13-15).¹⁰⁸ This sort of multi-ethnic, international solidarity movement amongst the poor was an unheard of historical development. One cannot overemphasize Paul's radical innovation in this regard.

2. *Economic Mutualism as Resistance to Imperial Practices of Patronage and Benefaction*

However, that this was an *international* movement already shifts us to the practice of resistance to the powers of Rome. Previously, in diasporic Jewish communities, there was an half-shekel Temple

¹⁰² Cf. Dunn 2009, 458-59; Thompson, 25-27, 135-36. Thompson shows how this interpretation is consistent with all of Paul's other uses of the term “the poor”. Georgi suggests that the reference contains both meanings (Georgi 1965, 33-35). Longenecker supports this by showing how this was the interpretation of the term “the poor” which dominated the first four centuries and their readings of Paul (Longenecker in Longenecker, 205-221).

¹⁰³ Cf. Sampley 1991, 40; Thompson 83-86.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Countryman 103-105; Georgi 1965, 156; Deissmann 1978, 104-105; Dunn 2009, 458-59.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Georgi 1965, 84-85. Paul employs the term twice in this passage and it appears nowhere else in his letters.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Cousar 2006, 45-46; Walsh & Keesmaat 71-75; Taubes 2009, 67; Georgi 1965, 148-49; Thompson 94.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Georgi 1965, 155-56; Fitzpatrick, 56-57.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Meggitt, 159-61.

tax that was gathered annually in order to finance sacrifices that were offered on behalf of the Emperor. However, that tax was only gathered from observant Jews. Paul, on the other hand, gathered money from people of all races, not to pay for a tribute to Caesar, but to care for the poor.¹⁰⁹ This, from the Roman perspective, was a problem. Creating a movement of solidarity amongst people that had been vanquished by Rome – a movement that transgressed established racial, geographical, and religious boundaries – would be perceived as an unprecedented threat to Roman peace and order.¹¹⁰ Rome and her allies were supposed to be the brokers of finance and of charity. Vanquished nations were only to relate to one another through a Roman intermediary and any sort of movement that cut out that Roman mediation was perceived of as dangerous if not downright rebellious.¹¹¹ It would not be tolerated.

(A) Roman Euergetism and Patronage

Here, in order to fully understand the seditious nature of this practice, it is necessary to look in some more detail at the already established Roman practice of euergetism, or charity, which took place through the system of patronage and benefaction. This system was one of the core elements of Roman imperialism and it permeated all areas of the Empire and all aspects of social and private life.¹¹² Essentially, in a society deprived any sort of “social welfare,” those with less were required to rely upon those with more. This was just as true of individuals as it was of associations or of entire cities – wherein individual patrons would sponsor everything from festivals, to feasts, games, and civic improvements like baths or roads.¹¹³

However, those with more are never inclined to simply give away what they have, but tend to find ways of giving that further enhance their status and their sociopolitical location. This is what the patronage system accomplished. What the patronage system did was establish an asymmetrical exchange relationship between two parties, which was the basis for long term mutual benefit, albeit within the context of a vertical relationship of dependency.¹¹⁴ Sometimes this occurred directly between two parties, and other times it was facilitated by a “broker,” a person in the middle who mediated the relationship.¹¹⁵ Thus, for example, a patron would provide his or her clients with food, money, legal aid, or other goods and, in return, the client would primarily respond by trying to advance the public honour of the patron and by showing loyalty to that patron in all areas of life.

Of course, this means that patronage tended to be practiced within limits. Apart from civic works which benefited entire populations, patronage was only offered to those who could fulfill their roles as clients. Therefore, clients tended to be people of similar status and virtue, but who had lost their wealth. Or they were slaves who were freed but remained legally bonded to their prior owners. The mass of people living at or below the subsistence level (who were automatically then considered as lacking virtue) would not be taken on as clients, as there was nothing to be gained from them.¹¹⁶ Here, there is a sharp divide between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor.

It is within the context of this system that one sees Roman references to the themes of faith (*pistis*) and grace (*charis*). Faith speaks of the concrete expressions of loyalty and dependability that is demonstrated between patrons and clients, and grace is used to refer to the granting of petitions, the gifts that are granted, and the gratitude shown by the recipients (*charis*, *charitas*, and *charin*

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Nickle, 87-99.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Callahan, 221; Horsley and Silberman, 170, 185-86; Thompson, 153; Wan 191-215.

¹¹¹ Cf. Kahl, ref.

¹¹² Cf. Dunn 2009, 551; Chow, 117-24; Crossan and Reed 2004, 297-98, 300, 306; Elliott 2008, 28-33.

¹¹³ Cf. Winter 1994, 26; deSilva, 100-101.

¹¹⁴ Cf. deSilva 97, Lampe, 488; Chow 105.

¹¹⁵ Cf. deSilva 97; Esler 2000, 18.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Winter 1994, 45.

respectively).¹¹⁷ Thus, while only freed-persons were legally bonded to their patrons, clients were bonded to them morally, socially, and economically – and to break this bond was to reduce one's status to that of a nobody or a nothing.¹¹⁸

Hence, while virtuous patrons were supposed to give without any thought of self-interest, any who received patronage and failed to respond properly were classified as the most dishonourable social ingrates.¹¹⁹ In this regard, two mindsets are required – the giver is to give without thought of return, and the receiver is to never forget his or her obligation to the giver.¹²⁰ A system is then constructed wherein those with material and political power are also granted moral and spiritual authority, and those without material and political power are forever indebted to those with power. The rulers are portrayed as virtuous and gracious, and the only proper response of the ruled is one of humble, dependable gratitude. This, then, becomes a form of biopower that exercises social control without needing to employ brute force because the vanquished subjects become self-disciplining. It also prevents the multitude of people in the lower ranks of society from climbing the social ladder (as they are forever indebted to their patrons) and it prevents these people from coordinating their interests or developing themselves into a cohesive body (as they would all be competing with each other for patronage and would need to demonstrate their loyalty to their patrons as much as possible in order to stay ahead of the competition).

Of course, within the Empire, the Emperor was considered the ultimate patron and the greatest public benefactor offering, amongst other things, relief from oppressors, pardon for crimes, food for the plebs (in Rome), and universal *pax et securitas* (a slogan Paul blatantly mocks in 1 Thess 5.3). For example, outside of the cost he paid to restore temples, host feasts, sponsor public games, and build aqueducts and public water fountains, Augustus gave 2.4 billion sesterces of his own to the poor in Rome and to retired soldiers.¹²¹ Consequently, in the cities frequented by Paul, the best way to get connected with this patron-of-patrons, was to become involved in the imperial cult. Hence, the local élites all held important priestly functions within that cult.¹²² In this way, the general system of charity that existed before the spread of the Roman Empire, became incorporated into the affirmation of Roman rule.

(B) Paul's Resistance to the Patronage System

With this in mind, it becomes more apparent how the collection and the economic mutualism practiced by Paul and the assemblies of Jesus were threatening to the Empire. Economic mutualism constructs very different relationships between people – these are horizontal not vertical relationships, ones that required mutual interdependence, not the dependency of the many on the few. In other words, the symmetrical model of Christ-like love, replaces the asymmetrical model of religious charity.¹²³ Further, in this economic practice the poor, people who were not even considered as clients, were made the priority. In this way, Paul tries to prevent the assemblies of Jesus from simply turning into a social clientele at the command of a few wealthy or high-status patrons.¹²⁴ The motive for good deeds is also transformed. One does not give in order to increase one's own status and to indebted others; rather, one

¹¹⁷ Cf. deSilva 104-106, 113-115; Lampe 493.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Lampe 491; MacMullen 1990, 193-96.

¹¹⁹ Cf. deSilva 106-111.

¹²⁰ Cf. deSilva, 117.

¹²¹ Cf. *Res Gestae*.

¹²² On the importance of the Emperor and the Imperial cult to the practice of patronage and euergetism, cf. DeSilva, 101-102; Garnsey and Saller, 96-103; Gordon 126-37; Horsley 2003a, 22-24; Lampe 493-94; Meeks 1983, 12.

¹²³ Cf. Meggitt 158, 175; Elliott 2004, 99-100; Wan, 196; Bockmuehl, 140; Lampe, 497-98; Winter 1994, 42-51.

¹²⁴ Cf. Theissen 1999, 90, 93.

simply gives based upon the material needs of others.¹²⁵ Further, one gives corporately – anonymously – and thereby fulfills Paul’s counter-cultural command to “outdo each other in *giving* honour [to others, instead of pursuing it for themselves]” (Ro 12.10).¹²⁶

By creating an economics of grace, expressed in practices like the collection for the poor in Jerusalem, Paul not only offers an alternative to standard practices of charity—he also directly refuses to engage in those other available practices. It is precisely this refusal to participate within the patronage system that gets Paul into so much trouble with some of the more influential members of the assemblies of Jesus at Corinth. The “Super-Apostles,” Paul criticizes had accepted patronage from some people at Corinth who lived above the subsistence level. Paul, however, refused this financial support, while accepting it from other assemblies, precisely because those at Corinth were offering the support, not on the terms of economic mutualism, but on the terms of *patrocinium*. It is this practice that Paul calls “an obstacle to the gospel” (cf. 1 Cor 9.3-19; 2 Cor 11.7-15; 12.11-18).¹²⁷ Of course, by refusing to participate in this system, Paul jeopardizes the standard protocols that existed around friendship: he offended those who had offered their support, and he made himself look like the kind of dishonourable social ingrate described above. It is no wonder, then, that he is scrambling for credibility in his letters to the Corinthians.

This, by the way, is also why Paul emphasizes the importance of working with his own hands (cf. 1 Cor 9.3-19; 2 Cor 11.7-15; 12.11-18; 1 Thes 4.10-12). Paul worked with his own hands, not because he held some sort of “Protestant Work Ethic” or because he wanted to distinguish between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor. No, Paul worked because he wanted to completely avoid the abusive forms of charity that were practiced in self-serving manners by those with wealth, status, and power. This is also why Paul accepted money from other assemblies of Jesus elsewhere – those (poorer) assemblies understood the difference between economic mutualism and patronage.

Ultimately, by engaging in this practice, by redefining economic and social relationships within the multiethnic and international assemblies of Jesus, Paul is shattering standard practices of charity, which supported the *status quo* of Empire. He is replacing those practices with a practice that had the potential to destroy that *status quo* and lead beyond Empire to the Commonwealth of God.

3. *Economic Mutualism as the Liberating and Life-Giving Expression of God’s Justice*

Finally, this leads us to Paul’s collection as a concrete example of liberation. In Paul’s context, wherein most of the members of the assemblies of Jesus were living at or below the subsistence level, this was liberation from necessity, hurt, and death.¹²⁸ It ensured that people would not have to sell themselves or their children into slavery in order to survive. It prevented people from becoming homeless and spending their days begging on the streets. It prevented people from having to leave families and communities in order to search for work elsewhere. It ensured that people would not starve to death. This was the liberating practice of life, survival, friendship, and community.

As such, the collection and the practice of economic mutualism became a revelation of the righteous justice of God, over against Roman parodies thereof. The Roman justice system, as I already noted, was driven to protect the claims and “rights” of the triumphant. Roman justice defended the private property of the victors and justified their acts of conquest, expropriation, taxation, and exploitation (which is also what Canadian justice does). All things, ultimately, were the private

¹²⁵ Cf. Thompson, 87; Theissen 1999, 71-72; deSilva, 152-54; Winter 1994, 60; Schottroff 1992, 247-49.

¹²⁶ Cf. Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii*, 110ff.

¹²⁷ Cf. Thompson 109-110; Elliott 1994, 201; Georgi 1984, 238-40; Gorman 2001, 290-91; Lampe 503; Dunn 2009, 806, 840; Judge 2008, 165-67.

¹²⁸ Cf. Meggitt, 163-65, 173-74; Georgi 1965, 160.

property of the Emperor, and defending this right was more important than doing things like ensuring abundant or even adequate life for the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Empire.¹²⁹

According to the Jewish Scriptures, Second Temple Judaism, and the messianic Jesus movement, however, one's right to private property was always subordinated to the needs of the vulnerable. This was because everything ultimately belonged, not to the Emperor, but to God. What people possessed was then seen as a gift from God, given not for the exclusive use of this or that individual, but given to be shared with those who needed it the most.¹³⁰ Thus, for Paul, the collection and the practice of economic mutualism are simply a reflection of God's true and just distribution of goods – goods that have been provided for all and are adequate for all. Therefore, that the members of the assemblies of Jesus share their food, money, clothes and homes with one another is the true and marvelous apocalypse of the *dikaiosyne theou* – the revelation of the righteous justice of God. This, indeed, is amazing grace. This is grace that not only liberates us from Sin and Death, but grace that liberates us from slavery and hunger, homelessness and isolation. It is grace that gives us life, not just in the “world to come,” but life here-and-now, in the midst of this present evil age.

¹²⁹ Cf. Kautsky, 84, 131; Jeffers 143-44; Wengst 1987, 26-37.

¹³⁰ Cf. Gonzalez, *passim*; Hengel 1974, 12-33; Georgi 1965, 149, 160-61.