

C H A P T E R O N E

IMPERIVM

Empire and the “Obedience of Faith”

The arrogance of powerful nations blinds them to the impossibility of achieving through force the willing consent of peoples whose labor and resources they would claim for their own. This impossibility generates tremendous tension within an empire’s ideological system, a contradiction so threatening that it must be suppressed through ideological mechanisms that Fredric Jameson has termed “strategies of containment.”¹ The ideology of the Roman Empire, no less than contemporary imperial ideology, was preoccupied with the challenge of “winning the hearts and minds” of conquered peoples.

Examining this constellation of rhetorical *topoi* offers a necessary lens for reading Romans. Paul declared that he was charged by God with securing “faithful obedience among the nations” (1:5, my trans.). That statement is a guide to the purpose of the letter and an indication of the political dimension of Paul’s rhetoric. Because the obedience of nations was the prerogative claimed by the Roman emperor, we must situate Paul’s rhetoric in a wider field of discourses, across different social locations, in which coercion and consent, obedience and subjection were aligned or opposed to each other.

The tension within Paul’s letter between willing obedience and subjection has its roots in the ideological contradictions of the Roman imperial system. Romans shows that Paul’s own thinking was constrained by the ideological pressures of his age. These pressures are not dissimilar to our own.

The Battle for Hearts and Minds

The consent of weaker peoples is of paramount importance to the ways in which the powerful seek to represent their rule to themselves and to their subjects. For that reason, the doctrinal system of an empire can ordinarily comprehend the refusal of the ruled to submit willingly to the benign intentions of their rulers as due only to some inherent fault that renders them unworthy, uncomprehending, and ungrateful. Thus, Edward Said observed, imperial cultures must rely on notions of bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric peoples and of the disturbingly

familiar ideas about flogging, death, or extended punishment being required when “they” misbehaved or became rebellious, because they mainly understood force or violence best; they were not like “us” and for that reason, deserved to be ruled.²

At its most generous, imperial ideology may sublimate this fault into a defect on the part of human society, understood generically. So the Christian Realism that served as the unofficial theology for much of the American Cold War establishment expounded on “the inescapable taint of sin on all historical achievements.”³ With regard to past endeavors, where historical hindsight is improved, similar generosity leads the architects of imperial policy belatedly to admit “the power of nationalism to motivate a people,” as it did the Vietnamese through the middle decades of the twentieth century, “to fight and die for their beliefs and values.” This was one of the “lessons learned” from the Vietnam War, according to former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara; yet it did not impede the determination of the would-be-conqueror nation, in McNamara’s words, to win “the hearts and minds of people from a totally different culture” through the application of force.⁴

That phrase gained currency during the Vietnam War, as architects of U. S. military policy sought to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people through what was meant to be an irresistibly persuasive combination of carpet bombing, the covert assassinations of perhaps 100,000 civil leaders (Operation Phoenix), and the forced resettlement of whole villages. A similar strategy (though with the bombing of civilian areas on a more limited scale) was applied throughout Central America in the 1980s, with comparable results: hundreds of thousands of people killed; civil society and infrastructure destroyed; at most, ambiguous success for the United States in achieving its political goals in the region; but nothing that could be confused with widespread popular approval or consent for U.S. hegemony. Predictably, policymakers found the fault not in U.S. policy, but in the inadequacies of peoples not yet “ready for democracy.”

Today, the government of the militarily most powerful nation on earth has arrogated to itself the right—or, in the preferred vocabulary of U.S. policymakers, has accepted the “unparalleled responsibilities”—of conforming other nations to its own vision of a global order. The corollary, commonly regarded in the United States as regrettable but unavoidable necessity, is that this noble vision can be attained only through the application of spectacular force.⁵ Within imperial culture, the necessity and legitimacy of bending the peoples of other nations to the will of American empire is routinely seen as self-evident. As journalist Thomas L. Friedman explains, every “global order” needs “an enforcer.” That is “America’s new burden,” Friedman declares, though without explaining either what is new about the role or exactly to whom it is a burden (surely not to policymakers or the interests they represent, as Friedman also makes clear).⁶ Within this mindset, the notion that force can achieve the willing consent of those who are its targets is uncontroversial; indeed it is a matter of explicit military strategy.⁷ It is even possible to imagine that the perceptions of force among the subjugated can be modified through better marketing, as by “branding” the Iraq War.⁸

The U.S. occupation of Iraq is widely regarded as a test case for winning hearts and minds by eliciting both fear and goodwill. After the devastating U.S. bombardment of Fallujah in November 2004, in which untold hundreds of civilians were killed, military officers and mainstream newspaper columnists alike regarded the campaign as a necessary and appropriate means to persuade the survivors to vote in an upcoming election in ways congenial to American interests. By producing “the spectacle of the subjugated city,” a *Washington Post* commentator wrote, U.S. bombardment would generate sufficient fear among the “ordinary people” of Fallujah to “clear the way” to favorable election results. Drawing out the implications of such statements, peace activist Jonathan Schell wondered whether the U.S. military had abandoned the classic formula, “hearts and minds,” from the days of the Vietnam War. Faced with the spectacle of heavy civilian casualties at the Fallujah general hospital, one of the U.S. military’s first targets, he wrote:

the reaction of the heart could only be pity, disgust, and indignation. Thus, only the “minds” of “the townspeople” could draw the necessary conclusions, as they survey the corpse-strewn wreckage of their city. In short, the people of Iraq will be stricken with fear, or, to use another word that’s very popular these days, terror. Then they’ll be ready to vote.⁹

But Schell’s misgivings were not shared by the military, for whom it still seemed possible to win *both* Iraqi hearts and minds if only the global news media would give up their irrational hostility toward the United States.¹⁰

The theoretical relation of violence and persuasion is a central topic in the so-called New Rhetoric.¹¹ The relation of force and opinion has been at the heart of analyses of modern imperial ideology and discussions of postcolonial theory as well.¹² But the architects and advocates of Roman imperial policy in Paul’s day proved themselves equally articulate on the subject.

Winning Hearts and Minds in Ancient Rome

Admittedly, the coercive aspect of the empire that Rome built is a delicate subject for some. In his study of “imperial ideology and provincial loyalty in the Roman Empire,” classicist Clifford Ando objects that reading class conflict into the ancient sources springs in part from “illusory and deceptive continuities between the ancient and modern worlds,” and from “contemporary desires to view Rome with twentieth-century eyes.” For Ando, only an “anachronistic cynicism,” an “arrogance born of luxury,” permits contemporary interpreters to read the literary remains of the ancient Roman elite with suspicion and to “patronize subject populations” in the ancient world “with deterministic ideologies of rebellion.”¹³ Unfortunately, Ando does not suggest how we might avoid reading with our own twentieth- or

twenty-first-century eyes. Nor has he evidently avoided the danger himself; in his buoyant enthusiasm for the “manifest success” of the Roman Empire, one detects no noticeable deviation from the reigning ideology of contemporary empire. In his explanation of the Roman Empire’s cohesion across the centuries, Ando minimizes the role of violence, insisting to the contrary that “propaganda is not necessarily rendered persuasive through the exercise of coercive force.”

That is a truism that we may observe readily illustrated, for example, in U.S.-occupied Iraq today. But that hardly means that we should presume the innocence of imperial propaganda. The same example shows that empires routinely and deliberately seek to join force to persuasion. “The manifest success of Rome in and of itself gave propaganda considerable empirical validity,” Ando declares—another truism, if we take it to include Rome’s manifest success in enslaving or destroying whole cities (Corinth, for example, in 146 B.C.E.). But Ando means instead only “the seductive power exercised by material prosperity,” evident in Roman achievements in “adorning cities with marble” and “leading clean water from distant hills.” He pleads at last for the “sincerity” of the elite texts at our disposal, asking, “what is the ‘topos’ if not the expression, however banal, of a great truth?”¹⁴

The obvious answer is that the *topoi* of imperial propaganda are the ideologically necessary instruments for representing actual power relationships in the public transcript. With ancient Rome particularly in mind, historian Richard Gordon observes that imperial themes provide an “unconscious veil distorting the image of social reality within [a] class and sublimating its interest basis” in such a way as to represent “a social fact—that is, imperialism”—in “the guise of fate and piety.”¹⁵ Because an empire relies upon coercion, it is by its very nature, in Walter Wink’s phrase, “a system in a permanent crisis of legitimation,”¹⁶ requiring a rhetorical arsenal of themes of inevitability, beneficence, and consent. These were the principal stuff of Roman imperial propaganda.¹⁷

The contours of Roman imperial ideology

An agrarian tributary empire, particularly one as parasitic as Rome’s, had specific ideological requirements.¹⁸ In his discussion of “class struggle on the ideological plane” in the Greco-Roman world, G. E. M. de Ste. Croix discussed the effective combination of “terror and propaganda” in Roman imperialism. He amply documented what he termed “the simplest form of psychological propaganda” that merely teaches the governed “that they have no real option but to submit. This tends to be intellectually uninteresting, however effective it may have been in practice, and consists merely of the threat of force. It was particularly common, of course, in its application to slaves,”¹⁹ but was inadequate by itself. Also necessary, and of more interest to Ste. Croix, was “a more sophisticated form of ideological class struggle,” “the attempt of the dominant classes to persuade those they exploited to accept

their oppressed condition without protest; if possible, even to rejoice in it. . . . The most common form of the type of propaganda we are considering is that which seeks to persuade the poor that they really are not fitted to rule and that this is much better left to their ‘betters.’”²⁰ Edward Said had modern empires in mind when he observed that “the rhetoric of power all too easily produces an illusion of benevolence when deployed in an imperial setting.”²¹ But the ideology of benefaction and patronage was just as pervasive, if not more so, in the Roman Empire. The codes of patronage effectively masked the deeply exploitive nature of the tribute- and slave-based economy by simultaneously concealing the rapacity of the ruling class and naturalizing fundamentally unequal relationships through routines of highly theatrical reciprocity.²²

The Roman ideological system proved remarkably adaptive. When, in the first century B.C.E., a devastating contest between two rival warlords threatened to lay bare the true nature of the system, the Senate moved swiftly to represent the emerging victor, Octavian, as a sacred figure (Augustus), whose efforts had secured not debilitating war (as the evidence might otherwise have indicated), but supreme peace throughout the empire, the *pax Romana*. The establishment of the principate was thus “the completion of a pyramid of power and patronage, involving the placing of a coping stone, admittedly a very large and heavy one, on top of the whole oppressive edifice.”²³ The quickly developed ideology of the principate held that the *princeps* (the “first man”) was the refuge and champion of the masses against the avarice of the Senate, a claim belied by the evidence.²⁴ Upon Octavian’s return to Rome, the Senate promptly awarded him a ceremonial golden shield, the *clupeus aureus*, celebrating him as the very embodiment of valor (*virtus*: in Greek, *aretē*), mercy (*clementia*: *epeikeia*), justice (*iustitia*: *dikaiosynē*), and dutiful devotion to the gods, his ancestors, and his posterity (*pietas*: *eusebeia*). Through the emperor, on his own account, “a large number of . . . nations experienced the good faith of the Roman people” (that is, their *fides*; in Greek, *pistis*), and through him, the Roman people themselves came into their divinely ordained destiny, to rule the world.²⁵

When catastrophic transitions (especially the coups d’état following the assassination of Gaius and the apparent murder of Claudius) threatened to demonstrate that emperors were, after all, interchangeable instruments of ruling class domination,²⁶ imperial ideology assured the public of continuity and stability through the legal fiction of dynastic succession (that is, familial, including adoptive, descent from Augustus: see the Timeline at the beginning of the book); by senatorial acclamation of the successor; and in the case of Claudius—one year before Romans was written—as of Tiberius and Augustus before him, by the grant to the predecessor of divine honors as one ascended into Olympian heaven. Finally, the increasing expansion of the Roman economy through the conquest and enslavement of subject peoples was effectively represented as the inevitable, divinely ordained, and indeed salutary destiny of the Roman people. As Virgil put it in the *Aeneid*, it was the destiny of Aeneas’s descendants to “crush proud nations,” to “rule the world . . .

to crown peace with justice, to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud.”²⁷ The self-evident corollary was that conquered nations were inherently inferior, destined to be ruled, as Cicero had labeled Judeans and Syrians “peoples born for slavery.”²⁸

The reading of Romans presented here depends on recognizing that these themes were perceived and treated differently in different social locations. Seeking to gain a measure of “the impact of domination on public discourse,”²⁹ James C. Scott distinguishes between what he calls the public transcript, that is, the zone of direct interaction between dominant and subordinate classes, and the “hidden transcripts” of the subordinate, on one hand, and the “hidden transcript of the dominant,” on the other (see Fig. 1.1).

Fig. 1.1. Hidden and Public Transcripts as described by James C. Scott

Hidden transcript of the dominant	Public transcript (with roles and expectations for subordinate and dominant classes)	Hidden transcript of the subordinate
Distinct from the perceptions attributed to the powerful in the public transcript; hidden because constrained by prevalent ideology.	Expressed in the public sphere as this is defined by the dominant classes, the public transcript includes roles assigned to the weak and the dominant, the powerless and the powerful alike; yet these are under constant negotiation in “the most vital arena for ordinary conflict, for everyday forms of class struggle.”	Distinct from the perceptions attributed to the subordinate in the public transcript; hidden because constrained by coercive force.

The hidden transcript of the powerful: The inevitability of rule by force

The hidden transcript of the dominant is “an artifact of the exercise of power. It contains that discourse—gestures, speech, practices—which is excluded from the public transcript by the ideological limits within which domination is cast.” The powerful can speak with candor when they know they are alone among their peers “and can let their hair down.” Such hidden transcripts are of particular value because the full public transcript offers only occasional, accidental glimpses into the actual motives of the powerful; as Scott observes, “dominant groups often have much to conceal, and typically also have the wherewithal to conceal what they wish.”³⁰

It is precisely the difference between the solemn assurances the elite gave their subjects regarding their altruism and benevolence, and the candor with which they admitted their rapacity to one another in private, that enables us to distinguish the hidden transcript of the powerful from the public transcript.³¹ The powerful frankly admitted the profit motive, especially when attributing it one-sidedly to

their rivals.³² The costs of conquest were normally borne by the imperial treasury (meaning, by the slaves, peasants, and laborers who actually produced the wealth Rome appropriated through taxation), whereas the profits accrued to a small circle of wealthy and powerful individuals.³³ (The phenomenon has precise contemporary parallels, as Michael Parenti observes.)³⁴ The rich occasionally commented on the miserable diet to which peasants were reduced after their crops had been confiscated for export, through taxation or sheer extortion.³⁵ On occasion, they could admit the causal connection between the misery of the poor and the “insatiate avarice” of their own class.³⁶ And no less an advocate of empire than Nero’s advisor Seneca could comment to a peer that “we Romans are excessively haughty, cruel, and insulting” to slaves.³⁷

Two ancient authors allow us to “listen in” on the hidden transcript of the powerful as the emperor Tiberius discusses the practices through which the Roman elite set about “plundering the provinces on a vast scale.”³⁸ On one occasion, Tiberius admonished an overly rapacious prefect in Egypt, “I want my sheep shorn, not shaved.” By shearing he apparently meant an appropriate, that is, politically sustainable level of exploitation (though we should not expect official tax edicts to have been phrased in that manner).³⁹ Neither did tax collectors likely present themselves to the peasants from whom they made their exactions as “blood-suckers,” though according to Josephus, Tiberius used that metaphor to explain why he replaced his governors only infrequently.⁴⁰ Decades later, Juvenal advised those preparing for a provincial governorship to moderate their greed, since due to the exactions of their predecessors, the poor provincials’ “very bones have been sucked dry of marrow.”⁴¹ For his part, Nero honed the principle to a fine point, as Suetonius reports: “His invariable formula, when he appointed a magistrate, was: ‘You know my needs! Let us see to it that nobody is left with anything!’”⁴²

Among themselves, the Roman ruling class acknowledged quite candidly that their rule could never rely on popular support alone. Good public order required the application or threat of force, not least because it was all subordinates could understand. When one slave murdered his master in 61 C.E., a lawyer rose in the Senate to support the traditional punitive executions of 400 of the slave’s fellows by insisting, “you will not restrain that scum except by terror.”⁴³ The actual brutality of the slave system was projected onto the “scum” themselves, and the actual vulnerability of slave bodies was internalized, by a curious imaginative inversion, by their masters: “you see how many dangers, insults, and mockeries we are liable to,” complained Pliny. “No master can be safe because he is indulgent and kindly, for masters perish not by the exercise of their slaves’ reasoning faculty but because of their wickedness.”⁴⁴

The same necessity applied to the masses. Cicero insisted that foolishly appealing to the consent of the governed risked putting civic order in the hands of the unruly mob, the people’s assembly whose salient characteristic was “irresponsibility,” “that monster which falsely assumes the name and appearance of a people.”

Only “the best men” could be motivated by a “sense of shame.” For lesser classes, the threat of punishment was necessary. It followed, naturally enough, that oligarchy and dictatorship were not only the most efficient, but also the most salutary forms of government, since “dominion has been granted by Nature to everything that is best, to the great advantage of what is weak.”⁴⁵

In Cicero’s day, the theme was already ancient, for Aristotle had assumed it. It also would prove long-lived, for centuries after both Aristotle and Cicero, intellectuals in the provinces would unselfconsciously describe Roman imperial rule as “established according to reason, for it is a law of nature, one common to all men . . . that the strong shall always rule over the weak” (Dionysius of Halicarnassus). Josephus put a similar argument into the mouth of Herod Agrippa as he sought to persuade the rebels of Jerusalem to surrender to the Romans; on his account, he himself made an impassioned appeal to the rebels to honor the “established law, ‘yield to the stronger.’”⁴⁶

Roman imperialists like Cicero simply “did not concede that their subjects or dependents had any right to be free of Roman rule. Liberty was the privilege of the imperial people” alone.⁴⁷ A contemporary of Augustus, the historian Livy, declared it common knowledge that from the beginning, the “first” and “noblest men” in various cities across the Mediterranean had welcomed Roman hegemony, but that “the common mass and those displeased with their circumstances desired a revolution.” Of necessity, then, Roman hegemony relied upon a judicious combination of persuasion (for the elite) and force (for everyone else).⁴⁸ According to Cicero, both shame and fear were necessary to instill public decorum in two classes of people, respectively: those who accepted proper standards of honor (and thus could feel and respond to shame) and the lower classes, who responded only to force and terror.⁴⁹ Closer to Paul’s time, the historian Velleius Paterculus used the same *topos* to explain that in the wake of a particular crisis, “all citizens have either been impressed with the wish to do right, or have been forced to do so by necessity.”⁵⁰ Later, the provincial Plutarch found it telling that the Romans built countless altars to Fortune, the god who had given triumphs into their hands, but that “they have no shrine of Wisdom or Prudence” as do peoples who value persuasion; clearly military prowess had proven the more serviceable virtue for their empire.⁵¹

What Ando termed the “seduction” of the provincial elite in fact relied on the frank calculation of what resistance would cost. Susan E. Alcock has documented the material hardship created by “the *de facto* subjugation of the Greek cities” by Rome long before 27 B.C.E., which entailed both military destruction of whole cities, the consequent collapse of others, and the severe disruption of “the lives of thousands of individuals” in communities affected by the economic, political, and military imposition of Roman control even in cities that survived.⁵² G. E. M. de Ste. Croix similarly observed that “Rome made sure that Greece was kept ‘quiet’ and friendly to her by ensuring that the cities were controlled by the wealthy class, which now had mainly given up any idea of resistance to Roman rule and in fact

seems to have welcomed it for the most part, as an insurance against popular movements from below.”⁵³

The same dynamic is evident today, of course, as journalist Thomas Friedman observes: “once a country makes the leap into the system of globalization, its elites begin to internalize this perspective of integration, and always try to locate themselves in a global context” instead, say, of seeking to advance the interests of the majorities of their own people.⁵⁴ The process seems quite natural to Friedman; we must look to other contemporary observers, for example, psychologists in French-occupied Algeria (Franz Fanon) or El Salvador under U.S. domination (Ignacio Martín-Baró), for a less buoyant discussion of the effects of “national security” measures on the masses.⁵⁵

The hidden transcript of the subordinate: Imperial violence seen from below

It is not surprising that the empire’s subjects agreed with their superiors that force was indispensable to Roman hegemony. After all, they bore its brunt. Their response to Roman greed, lust, and violence was often unalloyed hatred. So much we can gather from the limited sources available to us. By definition, Scott observes, “the hidden transcript of many historically important subordinate groups is irrecoverable for all practical purposes. What is often available, however, is what they have been able to introduce in muted or veiled form into the public transcript.”⁵⁶ “The first *open* statement of a hidden transcript, a declaration that breaches the etiquette of power relations, that breaks an apparently calm surface of silence and consent, carries the force of a symbolic declaration of war.”⁵⁷

Expressions of outright defiance of Roman rule were rare, desperate, and doomed. Tellingly, the few “declarations of war” against Rome available to us have been passed on by Roman historians after the ungrateful wretches had been put to death; the posthumous recitals illustrate the erstwhile ferocity of the vanquished and thus magnify the glory of the conquerors. Tacitus attributes a defiant speech to the war chief Calgacus, challenging his fellow Britons to resist the arrogant Romans, who could not be appeased by even the most restrained obedience of their subjects.⁵⁸ Tacitus also quotes the rallying cry of another Briton, the rebel Boudicca, from her war chariot, in which she stood with her two daughters who had, like her, been violated by Roman soldiers. Tacitus, himself a Roman aristocrat, passes these speeches along without any qualm regarding the justice of Roman conquest.⁵⁹

There are a few other examples of overt defiance of Rome.⁶⁰ Among Judeans, we gain a few oblique glimpses of anti-Roman rhetoric from Josephus, who writes for his own apologetic purposes decades after the disastrous revolt of 66–70 C.E. His agenda in presenting anti-Roman attitudes as a “Fourth Philosophy,” an improper deviation from the three authentic “philosophies” of Judaism (those of the Pharisees,

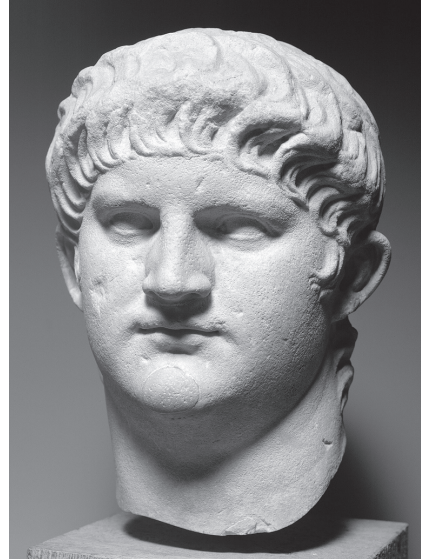
Saducees, and Essenes), is well known.⁶¹ Josephus acknowledges (through the voice of Agrippa, seeking to calm the populace of Jerusalem) that “there are many who wax eloquent on the insolence of the procurators and pronounce pompous panegyrics on liberty.” Unlike Tacitus, however, Josephus declines to provide specimens of this “eloquence,” preferring to give space instead to his own oratorical talents in the cause of submission.⁶²

Currents of protest

The paucity of direct first-hand evidence is precisely what we should expect on Scott’s analysis of the effects of domination upon discourse. Unable to express their resistance openly, subordinate groups must ordinarily rely on strategies of indirection and disguise, or else seek the safety of anonymity. There is abundant indirect evidence for “a permanent current of hostility” on the part of the masses in Rome to “senatorial misrule and exploitation,” from the time of the Republic on.⁶³ The occasional surprise expressed by the elite when a gesture of courage sparked an explosion of popular unrest suggests that the common people more usually were constrained to suppress their dissatisfaction.⁶⁴ Defiance surfaced in strategies of anonymity that Scott calls the “everyday forms of class struggle.”⁶⁵ Strategies of “political disguise” included graffiti, effigies anonymously erected in public,⁶⁶ and spontaneous street demonstrations (termed “riots” by the elite).⁶⁷ The alternatives available to subordinate groups are more complex, then, than a naked choice between silence and defiance. What Scott calls the “strategic uses of anonymity,” including collective action and the anonymity of the crowd, reflects “a popular tactical wisdom developed in conscious response to the political constraints realistically faced,” that is, the constant threat of violent suppression.⁶⁸

In the years of Nero’s reign alone, we notice the threat of slave insurrection smoldering in Tacitus’s comment that one of Agrippina’s aristocratic rivals was condemned for “disturbing the peace of Italy by failing to keep her Calabrian slave-gangs in order”; in his reference to “riots, with stone-throwing and threats of arson,” provoked by official corruption in nearby Puteoli; and in the account of an angry mob surrounding the Senate house, armed with stones and torches, when the Senate condemned four hundred slaves to death in retaliation for the murder of their master.⁶⁹

There was plenty to protest, not the least in Nero’s day, despite his wide reputation among modern scholars as an improvement over his predecessors. While the lower classes often regarded the emperors, rightly or wrongly, as “a restraint on the rapacity of the Senate, and for themselves a refuge,”⁷⁰ many were perfectly aware that Nero, in particular, was neither. His heavy-handed exactions “exhausted the provinces” and eventually sparked revolts in Britain and Judea.⁷¹ When the people of Rome itself pressed for relief from the “excessive greed” of duty collectors, Nero proclaimed



Colossal head of the emperor Nero. Ca. 65 C.E. Marble. Staatliche Antikensammlung, Munich. Photo © Alfredo Dagli Orti; Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/ Art Resource, N.Y.

himself the people’s champion, but initiated “reforms” that streamlined the collection system and lowered only selected duties that cut too deeply, in his view, into the profits of the wealthy (two of whom he personally acquitted of charges of embezzlement and abuse in Africa).⁷² Nero eliminated public banquets; perhaps he saw them as an extravagance wasted on the masses, who (after all!) already enjoyed the monthly grain distribution—the *frumentatio*, which for more than a century had been necessary to maintain a fifth of the population of Rome at the subsistence level (if it did that much). Even this was not safe from the emperor’s avarice: Tacitus reports that Nero appropriated a large part of the grain supply for his own financial speculation.⁷³ The emperor’s astounding extravagance—including ostentatious building projects and constant ceremonial self-indulgence, as well as the incredible largesse he bestowed on his personal clients—strengthened the impression that his rule had brought tremendous wealth to Rome. However, it also brought him to such personal financial straits that he eventually turned, Suetonius declares, to “robbery and blackmail,” imposing arbitrary penalties and confiscation of the estates of his richest political enemies (including the six men who, in the elder Pliny’s words, “owned half of Africa”⁷⁴). He appropriated sacred property from temples in Rome. The lower classes shrewdly perceived such recklessness as a direct threat to their interests, as when the rumor spread that the latest ship from Alexandria carried in its hold not grain, to ease the price of bread in Rome, but sand for the imperial wrestlers.⁷⁵

Forms of anonymous protest—anonymous jokes circulating through the capital and graffiti appearing on public walls overnight—mocked the key claims of imperial propaganda, ridiculing Nero’s extravagant building projects, mocking his claim to be descended from the ancient Trojan hero Aeneas, and after 59 C.E., taunting

him as his mother's murderer as well,⁷⁶ despite his calculated efforts in the theater (ably discussed by Edward Champlin) to identify that act as the embodiment of mythic themes of justified matricide.⁷⁷

It is customary in classical and biblical studies to accept the view that many of Nero's abuses emerged only later in his rule, after earlier years that provided "an exemplary form of government and law enforcement, despite the profligate personal habits of Nero himself." At the time Paul wrote Romans, after all, Nero had not yet ordered his own mother's execution.⁷⁸ In his monograph on the emperor, Edward Champlin warns against accepting the later Christian demonization of Nero as monster and points out that long after his suicide, he enjoyed an impressive career as a figure in the popular imagination.⁷⁹ But Nero's "posthumous popularity" as an avenging angel (or devil) hardly means that, as Champlin puts it, he was remembered as "a good man and a good ruler" during his lifetime. Rather it shows simply that he was remembered as one capable of spectacular violence, and (as Champlin points out) of a theatrically performed disdain for the sensibilities of the ruling class, which endeared him to theatrical audiences without actually upsetting the disparity in power.⁸⁰ Conventional references in modern scholarship to "five good years" at the beginning of Nero's reign depend on a much-later comment by Trajan (emperor from 98 to 117 C.E.) that the building projects of all the other emperors had been surpassed by "five years of Nero." But other contemporaries could grudgingly acknowledge the splendor of his buildings and still recognize the moral disaster of his reign: "What is worse than Nero?" quipped Martial, "What is better than Nero's baths?"⁸¹

My point is not to mount a referendum on Nero's rule, but to observe the fact, amply documented for his rule and those of his predecessors with impressive consistency, of chronic resentment on the part of the lower classes toward what they clearly perceived as a plutocracy hostile to their interests.

The Dialectic of Defiance and Caution

Scott's analysis explains why the ancient sources upon which we must depend for a history "from below" offer only indirect testimony. "The frontier between the public and hidden transcripts," he writes, "is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate—not a solid wall. The capacity of dominant groups to prevail—though never totally—in defining and constituting what counts as the public transcript and what as offstage is . . . no small measure of their power. The unremitting struggle over such boundaries is perhaps the most vital arena for ordinary conflict, for everyday forms of class struggle."⁸²

His insight is hardly a modern discovery. No less erudite an observer than Philo of Alexandria provided an analysis very similar to Scott's when he contrasted the

“untimely frankness” (*parrhēsia akairon*) of those who resisted Rome openly, but at an inopportune time, with the caution (*eulabeia*) that is more usually appropriate to the public square. “When the times are right,” Philo explains, “it is good to set ourselves against the violence of our enemies and subdue it; but when the circumstances do not present themselves”—as is usually the case in history, Scott suggests—“the safe course is to stay quiet.”⁸³ “Staying quiet” clearly implies the self-restraint that keeps an oppositional transcript hidden.

The two sets of circumstances that Philo described did not inhere in two fixed and segregated social zones, but were possibilities precisely in the public sphere. The public transcript reproduces the dominant values of the ruling class but also serves the purposes of the subordinate by allowing them to veil or cloak their resentment or defiance. Philo’s phrase, “when the times are right,” points to *circumstances* allowing the irruption of a previously hidden transcript into the public transcript. What Philo describes in Roman Alexandria Scott calls the “unremitting struggle” to define what may and may not be said about power relations in public. As Philo also makes clear, the “right time,” that is, the circumstances in which defiance may be openly expressed, are determined by force, or its relative absence. His complaint about those who speak with “untimely frankness” is not just that they have misjudged circumstances but that their brazen miscalculation has brought brutal and catastrophic reprisals against their own people and their own families—an apparent reference to the awful events of 38–41 C.E. in Alexandria.

The public transcript: Contesting the relation of coercion and consent

The reciprocal roles assigned in the public transcript of the Roman imperial order were clear enough, and recently have been the subject of important studies.

On one side, one could see inscribed on every public surface, hear in official panegyric, and in civic ceremonial be swept up into the open and official representation of the glory and beneficence of the empire.⁸⁴ Just as in our own day the *National Security Strategy of the United States* extols the happy “union of our values and our national interests” in the expansion of U.S. hegemony, so the Roman ruling class regarded the expansion of the empire through military conquest, enslavement, and systematic economic exploitation as the marvelous coincidence of self-interest and benevolence. So Cicero, writing a century before Paul:⁸⁵

Wisdom urges us to increase our resources, to multiply our wealth, to extend our boundaries. . . . Wisdom urges us also to rule over as many subjects as possible, to enjoy pleasures, to become rich, to be rulers and masters; Justice, on the other hand, instructs us to spare all men, to consider the interests of the whole human race, to give everyone his due, and not to touch sacred or public property, or that which belongs to others.⁸⁶

In the public transcript, the elite described rule over others as springing naturally from the benign consideration of the needs of inferiors. The historian Appian considered it common sense that the Greeks had invited Roman domination by their shameful infighting, which proved their incapacity for self-rule; Herodian called their warring “an ancient condition,” a flaw that required the discipline of an outside power.⁸⁷ P. A. Brunt observes that the elite regarded even nations beyond Rome’s reach “as rightfully their subjects.” Lands and peoples already conquered were described as enjoying the “friendship” of Rome, even when in actuality they were “expected to behave as vassals,” for example, by offering their children as hostages to prevent wholesale destruction. Where Roman exertions to subjugate peoples (that is, to “restore peace”) were successful, loyalists perceived that Rome’s hegemony was beyond dispute or protest, being founded on a superior capacity for ruling, a natural right to demand submission from all others.⁸⁸ Wherever they met resistance, they saw only the bad faith of insubordinate peoples.⁸⁹

The quintessential expression for the reciprocal responsibility between conqueror and conquered was *fides*, “faithfulness” (Greek *pistis*), “a cardinal, shared Roman value and an essential concept for Rome’s *imperium*.” *Fides* was routinely illustrated on coins, for example, by the portrait of the Roman conqueror extending one hand in alliance, holding a spear in the other—to be wielded in protection of Rome’s allies, of course.⁹⁰ Cicero hailed justice (*ius*) and faithfulness (*fides*) as the hallmarks of beneficent Roman rule. *Fides* and *amicitia*, “friendship,” were the potent euphemisms by means of which Rome represented to subject peoples—in rhetoric, inscriptions, and monuments—that their subjection and willing obedience would be rewarded by the protective care of their conquerors.

In the eyes of the elite, these virtues were self-evidently compatible with the exertion of force. Early in the Republic, the dictator Sulla boasted that “from the beginnings of their empire the Roman people have preferred to acquire friends rather than slaves, thinking it safer to rule by good will rather than by force,” the historical record notwithstanding.⁹¹ When ambassadors from Rhodes came to Rome to offer their submission, they sued to become clients of Rome as their patron and asked to be protected by the bond of *fides*.⁹² Cato the Elder accused a political rival of humiliating Rome’s “allies” (in this case, client princes) and thereby violating Roman *fides*; arguably, the violation also demonstrated its true nature.⁹³ *Fides* was a watchword of the Augustan age, along with “Peace, Honor, old-fashioned Shame, and Valor, which had been neglected” previously: so Horace.⁹⁴ Augustus used “friendship” and “faithfulness” interchangeably with the language of conquest and subjection in the *Res gestae*, the “Acts of the Divine Augustus,” reciting how he had “subjected the whole world to the sovereignty [*imperium*] of the Roman people.” He had, through warfare, “reduced to a state of peace” the lands of the Gauls, Spain, Germany, and the Alps and compelled the Parthians and other peoples to “seek as suppliants the friendship [*amicitia*] of the Roman people.” Such statements indicate the close relationship in the imperial mentality between “peace” and conquest,

“friendship” and subjection. Rome’s friendship sometimes required the surrender of the children of a royal house as hostages, as in the case of Parthia. “A large number of other nations,” Augustus summarizes at length, had “experienced the good faith of the Roman people,” that is, their *fides*.⁹⁵

On the other side, however, the public transcript also included rehearsals of the servile deference required of the subordinate in the elaborate rituals of respect and subjection observed in the city streets, no less than in public assembly. The most abject expressions of deference were called forth from the powerless, as exemplified (to take but one of a number of available texts) in an Egyptian papyrus letter written by the peasants of what historian Ramsey MacMullen called “a ‘monopolized’ village”:

We wish you to know, Lord, that . . . we have never handed over our bodies—rather, year in and year out, that we have completed our due services but surrender ourselves to no one. . . . But if any should come for the best of our young fellows, we would not say you nay. Do whatever seems best to you to do.⁹⁶

Note here both the lingering hint of pride (“we have never handed over our bodies”) and the abject humiliation, all the more pathetic by contrast, of a village ready to surrender their sons to the magistrate for his own (unnamed) purposes. All this was accomplished, we must remember, by force. MacMullen remarks on the recurrent references in the Egyptian papyri to “physical outrage, . . . beatings, maulings, and murders” through which the Romans and their tax farmers “wrung ultimately from the provincial peasants all that could be economically extracted.”⁹⁷ We do not know the outcome of the petition of this village, or of countless others to be read from the papyri. Clifford Ando finds in them an occasion to marvel at the confidence provincials put in the Roman legal system.⁹⁸ I note instead the deference required even of those seeking the vindication of their rights and the redress of injury in that system.

Coercion and consent may have appeared complementary to the imperial mind, but the subjects of the empire could readily distinguish and even oppose the two. Philo, who could hint broadly at the brutality of Roman magistrates, in general, and of Gaius (Caligula) in particular, presented Moses by way of contrast as the world’s premier lawgiver. In his laws, Moses “suggests and admonishes rather than commands,” in laws written “in order to exhort rather than to enforce.”⁹⁹ Josephus, whose politics were far more accommodationist toward the Romans than Philo’s,¹⁰⁰ nevertheless similarly could acknowledge that Roman governors could be “intolerably harsh.” He, too, identified the superiority of the Judean constitution in Moses’ decision to create a theocracy, overseen by priests “preeminently gifted with persuasive eloquence and discretion,” rather than a monarchy or an oligarchy based on compulsion. Moses recognized that “issuing orders without words of exhortation,

as though to slaves instead of free men, savored of tyranny and despotism.”¹⁰¹ These two Judean voices, writing as apologists for the Judean cause, relied on the current Roman *topos* but inverted it: coercion and consent were incompatible, and the former was unworthy of free people.

Typically, expressions of protest or resistance in the Judean literature that has come down to us are couched in veiled or muted terms. They offer glimpses into what we may presume, following Scott’s argument, was a deeper, richer hidden transcript of resentment, the subterranean resistance that ultimately erupted in rebellion. Such, for example, was the oblique invective of the first-century B.C.E. *Psalms of Solomon*, where the arrogance of Pompeii was condemned without naming him except as “the sinner” (*ho hamartōlos*) and his troops as “foreign nations” (*ethnē*); or again, the esoteric biblical interpretation of the Habakkuk Peshet from Qumran, which condemned the violence and arrogance of the Romans as those who “eat up all the peoples like an insatiable vulture,” but only under the symbolic name *Kit-tim*. Philo offered allegorical interpretations of Scripture, reading biblical characters as figures of tyranny (the sons of Cheth in Gen 23:7; Joseph himself in Genesis 37).¹⁰² When he complained elsewhere of the breathtaking sadism of Roman taxgatherers in Egypt, he did so in carefully vague or even evasive language, referring to “a person” (*tis*) who was put in charge of tax gathering “a little time ago.”¹⁰³ Following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, we find the same bitter condemnation of Rome in the veiled allegorical symbolism of the apocalypses.¹⁰⁴

The Public Transcript in Nero’s Rome

The phenomena Scott discusses as “hidden” and “public transcripts” are not aspects inhering in texts as such, so that if only we spent sufficient time staring at a text (such as Romans) through the right methodological lens, we could confirm its character as one or the other. No ancient text spontaneously reveals itself as a hidden transcript. As Cynthia Briggs Kittredge rightly warns, to apply Scott’s work to biblical studies, we necessarily depend on a historical reconstruction of a particular historical context, and of the way in which power constrained the discourse of social groups in that context.¹⁰⁵

Edward Champlin’s recent study of Nero enables us to say a great deal about the cultural environment in the city to which Paul wrote. Champlin emphasizes the rich repertoire of statuary, monument, inscription, and (of special relevance with regard to this emperor) theater, all conveying a single, powerful message regarding the inevitability and rightness of the imperial regime. This cultural repertoire surrounded the observer with highly charged images of the gods and of illustrious heroes of the past, images

displayed in every public corner of the city of Augustus, replicated in private works of art, and elaborated by the poets, orators, and historians of the day. . . . [D]aily life was permeated by such examples from the past, all dedicated to comment on the present. It was customary to present Rome's leaders wrapped in the deeds and virtues of figures from myth and legend, and the Roman people were thoroughly accustomed to read and appreciate the messages they bore.¹⁰⁶

If the public transcript was a zone of contestation, one voice in that contest was clear and powerful. Nero (or rather, his speechwriter, Seneca) provides one of the most vivid expressions of the imperial understanding of the necessity of rule. Looking out over "this vast throng—discordant, factious, and unruly, ready to run riot alike for the destruction of itself and others if it should break its yoke"—the emperor realizes that without his benevolent leadership, "no part of the wide world can prosper."

Just as the body depends upon the governance of the mind, in the same way this vast throng, encircling the life of one man, is ruled by his spirit, guided by his reason, and would crush and cripple itself with its own power if it were not upheld by wisdom. . . . For he is the bond by which the commonwealth is united, the breath of life, which these many thousands draw, who in their own strength would be only a burden to themselves and the prey of others if the great mind of the empire should be withdrawn. . . . Such a calamity would be the destruction of the Roman peace, such a calamity will force the fortune of a mighty people to its downfall. Just so long will this people be free from that danger as it shall know how to submit to the rein; but if ever it shall tear away the rein, . . . the end of this city's rule will be one with the end of her obedience.¹⁰⁷

And what of other voices? That a deranged eighteen-year-old could be described as the "mind of the empire" says something about the tone of public deliberation in Nero's day. Champlin's observations about the constricted sphere of public discourse in Rome bear out Scott's argument regarding the constraints of power in the public transcript. In the mid-first century B.C.E., Cicero had recognized only three public zones in which the Roman people could speak their mind: public assemblies, elections, and the games and gladiator shows. After the accelerated consolidation of power in the single figure of the emperor, the marginalization of the first two zones, public meetings and elections, meant that by the mid-first century C.E., "the outlet provided by the games became even more important." The games and the theater were the remaining public venues where the Roman people could take advantage of large numbers and individual anonymity to proclaim their views about current public issues, loudly and directly, to their leaders. It was generally understood that

things could be said within the special confines of a theater, circus, or arena which could not be said elsewhere. . . . This outlet provided by the games became even more important under the principate, as one-man rule stifled republican politics, and the institutions of debate (the public meetings) and voting (the assemblies) faded away.¹⁰⁸

Perhaps this “outlet” was allowed to continue precisely because the role assigned to the people had become so tightly circumscribed: in Champlin’s words, “the games lent themselves to a ritualized dialogue between the emperor and his people.”¹⁰⁹ In this “ritualized dialogue,” Nero presented himself as the champion of the people; attentive, at least theatrically, to their voices.¹¹⁰ (The feigned populism of fantastically wealthy leaders, whose policies in fact serve the interests of their own class, is a phenomenon familiar enough in our own day as well.) But the constraints imposed on the public transcript meant that direct dissent was suppressed.

In the last public site where the people’s voice was still heard, albeit in a highly stylized fashion, Champlin speaks of an “abundance of evidence,” from the late Republic onward, “that Roman theatrical audiences were extraordinarily quick to hear the words spoken and to see the actions presented on stage as offering pointed commentary on contemporary life.”¹¹¹ Playwrights and actors alike changed or read lines so as to produce a subversive double entendre; equally important, audiences occasionally responded to double entendres even if these had not been intended. Champlin concludes that

This remarkable sensitivity on the part of the audience underscores the heightening of awareness within a Roman theater: audiences *expected* to find contemporary relevance in the productions; performers *expected* to have their pointed remarks and actions caught, interpreted, and appreciated. . . . In short, the Roman people were accustomed to seeing their rulers everywhere presented as figures of well-known myths, and they were accustomed to performances on stage that commented directly on their own contemporary concerns. . . . Rome by Nero’s day was a city thoroughly accustomed to the widespread, programmatic representation of myth in public life, and to the deep implication of the audience in theatrical performance.¹¹²

Champlin’s observations point to an important aspect of the immediate environment in which Paul’s letter was read, or rather performed,¹¹³ in Rome. Given the constraints operative in the public transcript, we might expect *direct* political commentary at odds with the prevailing order to be either rare or nonexistent there; yet for that very reason, the “remarkable sensitivity” of the Roman populace to *oblique* commentary on current events is all the more important.

But on what basis might we identify anything Paul says as bearing, however indirectly, on contemporary events?

In his landmark discussion of “intertextual echo” in Paul’s letters, Richard B. Hays identified seven “tests” for reasonably identifying allusions in one text (like Romans) to another (like Isaiah or the Psalms).¹¹⁴ These tests are just as applicable to the themes of myth and ideology that so charged the air of the imperial capital.

1. Under the rubric *availability*, Hays asks, “Was the proposed source of the echo available to the author and/or original readers?” We can have no doubt that through mass dissemination by means of imagery, ceremonial, and panegyric, themes of imperial propaganda saturated the cities of the Roman Empire. Indeed, recognizing the overwhelming “availability” of imperial themes in Paul’s environment, we may wonder whether the energy devoted to determining how conversant Paul’s non-Judean hearers were with the Septuagint might better be directed to another symbolic repertoire with which they were *undoubtedly* more familiar. (Hays himself regards just this question as “intriguing” and worthy of further investigation.¹¹⁵)

2. Under *historical plausibility*, Hays asks, “Could Paul have intended the alleged meaning effect? Could his readers have understood it?” Just here Champ-
lin’s observations about the “remarkable sensitivity” of Roman audiences to irony, double entendre, and other forms of indirect commentary must be an important consideration.

3. Under *volume*, Hays is concerned with “the degree of explicit repetition of words or syntactical patterns, but other factors may also be relevant: how distinctive or prominent is the precursor text?” Here the case with regard to themes from imperial ideology is necessarily much murkier, because Paul neither quotes nor cites imperial declarations (though the contemporary recognition of an allusion to official propaganda in 1 Thess 5:3 bears note), nor does he quote from recognizable Roman works like the *Aeneid*. Hays’s reference to “other factors” is therefore all the more important. Themes that loom large in Romans—justice, mercy, piety, and virtue—were *overwhelmingly* “distinctive and prominent” in Roman imperial ideology as well.

4. Hays considers another criterion, the *history of interpretation*, “one of the least reliable guides for interpretation” precisely because the interpretation of Paul’s letters has been so long dominated by theological agendas. We are nevertheless at a turning point in the history of interpretation in which political themes and allusions in Paul’s writings are increasingly recognized.¹¹⁶

Other criteria named by Hays—*recurrence*, *thematic coherence*, and *satisfaction*—are more subjective criteria involving the interpreter’s sense of Paul’s theology as a whole.

There is at least a *prima facie* case for reading Romans with the same “remarkable sensitivity” to political connotations that was evident in the Roman theater. Indeed, given that Paul’s letter would have been read in a much less surveilled social site, we may suppose that the sort of expectations that Champlin describes for the theater might have been heightened there.

Winning Hearts and Minds in Romans

A call for obedience

At the beginning of Romans, Paul declares that he writes to include his hearers in the “faithful obedience among all the nations” that is his sacred duty to secure (1:5). He has long desired to come to the Romans, he writes, “so that I might reap some harvest among you, as among the rest of the nations. For I am obligated both to Greeks and barbarians, to the educated and the unlettered—therefore I am eager to proclaim God’s imminent triumph to you also who are in Rome” (1:14-15).

These statements of purpose are as clear as they are politically evocative. Yet for most of Christian history, to the present day, interpreters have studiously read them in innocuously religious ways, failing to take seriously either Paul’s avowed purpose or its political connotations.

The observation is now commonplace that some of Paul’s most theologically significant phrases would have resonated with imperial overtones. His titles for Christ (“lord,” *kyrios*, and “son of God,” *huios tou theou*), for example, were titles that the Caesars also claimed.¹¹⁷ The terms normally translated “gospel” or “good news” (*euangelion*) and “preach the gospel” (*euangelizesthai*) were readily employed in Paul’s world as an element of imperial propaganda, referring to announcements of the emperor’s victories and accession.¹¹⁸ Attention to the imperial context of Romans must go beyond the observation of verbal parallels, however, to ask about the rhetorical thrust of the letter.

In the politeness of Paul’s language when he expresses mutuality (“that is, that we may be mutually encouraged . . . you and me,” 1:12), and his postponement until the end of the letter of his future travel plans to Rome and beyond it, to Spain (compare 1:11 with 15:28-29), interpreters like Ernst Käsemann have found indications of Paul’s “insecurity,” “fear,” “uncertainty,” and “embarrassment” before his hearers. Similarly, the expression of confidence in 15:14-16 has convinced many that whatever Paul means to accomplish in this letter, he does *not* wish to be perceived as holding his hearers to account (as his use of the word “admonish” in 15:14 might otherwise imply).¹¹⁹

But I myself am quite confident about you, my brothers and sisters, concerning you that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and capable of admonishing [*nouthetein*] one another. But I have rather boldly written to you, in part, as if reminding you, on account of the grace given to me by God so that [*eis*] I be a minister of Christ Jesus to the nations, doing holy service to the proclamation of God’s triumph, in order that [*hina*] the offering of the nations may be pleasing, sanctified in holy spirit.

Paul's courteous speech should not distract us from the force of his rhetoric, however. It should point us rather to the letter's hortatory function, since diplomatic language was one mode, in Paul's day a preferred mode, for issuing commands. The courteous tone should not mislead us, then, into assigning Romans to the genre of the "ambassadorial letter."¹²⁰ Likewise, his use of expressions of confidence is what we should expect in a hortatory letter.¹²¹ Paul writes to elicit a definite response from the Romans. True, in the beginning of the letter, Paul mentions a prospect for a *future* visit that he names at last as the purpose of a letter now completed. This is not because the Romans themselves never really were the object of Paul's concern, however, but because Paul expects the letter *itself* to have achieved what he earlier said he would have wanted to achieve, but from which he had been prevented in a personal visit.¹²² As J. P. Sampley puts it, Romans is not *about* "Paul's gospel." It *is itself* Paul's effective proclamation of an alternative lordship, at work as the Romans hear it.¹²³

The letter is directed toward a clear end. However courteous Paul's tone, he speaks as the duly commissioned representative of a lord who is to be obeyed, and he writes to secure "faithful obedience among the nations" to that lord. As Victor Paul Furnish observed, the letter evokes the disobedience of unjust human beings in 1:18-32; poses slavish obedience to sin and injustice against willing obedience to God in 6:12-23; and calls the Romans to a willing obedience that is their "spiritual worship" to God (12:1-2). Their positive response to the letter will incorporate them into the fulfillment of prophecies about the nations joining in praise with Israel (15:7-13) and will ensure the sanctity of "the offerings of the nations" that it is Paul's priestly service to present (15:14-16).

His exhortation has an international horizon, as the "programmatic" phrase "faithful obedience among the nations" indicates.¹²⁴ The Christian interpretive tradition has long translated *hypakoēn pisteōs* with "the obedience of *faith*" (so NRSV), language that implies that Paul meant primarily the trusting *assent* of his listeners to his message (his gospel) or their *acceptance* of his theological propositions about the way God saves. This translation has proven serviceable to a tradition eager to contrast salvation by faith in Jesus with the works-righteousness it has attributed, wrongly, to Judaism; but it is dubious on several grounds. Lexically, *pistis* normally had the sense, even in Israel's scriptures, not of "belief" but of faithfulness, involving loyalty and steadfastness. (Correspondingly, in Rom 3:3, the NRSV rightly translates *pistis tou theou* with "the faithfulness of God," not "God's faith"; at 1 Thess 1:8-9, Paul could tell the Thessalonians that their *pistis* meant, not simply that they had ceased to *believe* in idols, but that they had turned "to *serve* [*doouleuein*] a living and true God.") Indeed, the semantic range of *pistis* overlaps with that of *hypakoē*, "obedience," so that Paul can use the terms almost interchangeably in Romans.¹²⁵ Grammatically, the genitive phrase "obedience of faithfulness" functions to specify what *kind* of obedience is meant: *faithful* obedience (as contrasted with some other

kind).¹²⁶ Rhetorically, the phrase “faithful obedience” helps to establish the tone (and in fact the genre) of Romans as a letter of exhortation.¹²⁷

The specification “faithful obedience *among all the nations*” evokes a horizon beyond the Romans. Their positive response to the letter will catch them up in a larger drama, the obedience of nations that Paul has helped to bring about “from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum” (15:18–19). The phrase signals the eschatological announcement of God’s triumph over a rebellious world.¹²⁸ It evokes a scriptural vision in which the establishment of God’s dominion over the earth included the subduing of hostile and oppressive nations. The obedience to which Paul calls his hearers incorporates them into the “offerings of the nations,” his collection for the “poor” in Jerusalem, to which Macedonia and Achaia have contributed (15:25–27).¹²⁹

The NRSV translates the phrase “the offering of the Gentiles,” just as in 1:5, it renders “the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles.” In everyday Greek and in the Greek of the Septuagint, however, *ta ethnē* meant “the nations,” roughly parallel to *hoi laoi*, “the peoples.” The singular, *to ethnōs*, referred not to a Gentile individual, but to a nation: thus, significantly, Paul never uses the term. (When he speaks of individuals, he uses *Ioudaios*, Judean or Jew, and *Hellēn*, Greek. Despite the subsequent title given to his letter, Paul never speaks of Romans, but of “God’s beloved in Rome,” 1:7.) Historical considerations, too, militate against the translation *Gentiles* as an anachronism. Although many New Testament scholars follow the NRSV in using the translation (with a capital “G,” suggesting a distinct ethnic identity equivalent but opposite to Jews), the notion that non-Judeans in the Roman congregations would have thought of themselves as Gentiles is unsustainable. The Greek *ethnē* was a convenient term by which Judeans might refer to all non-Judeans. But Christopher P. Stanley rightly observes that “in social terms, *there was simply no such thing as a Gentile in the ancient world.*” Non-Judeans would naturally “have defined themselves as ‘Greeks,’ ‘Romans,’ ‘Phrygians,’ ‘Galatians,’ ‘Cappadocians,’ and members of various other ethnic populations.” Thus, “to speak of ‘Jewish-Gentile conflicts’ in antiquity is to confuse social analysis with ideology.”¹³⁰ The unfortunate proliferation of Gentiles in recent translations is a lexically and exegetically dubious practice and one to be resisted.¹³¹

It follows that we should not think of Paul as some sort of religious entrepreneur, offering a new message of personal salvation to individuals who happened not to be ethnically Judean. Rather, Paul “thinks in nations” (Johannes Munck); he saw himself as the apostle “to the peoples of this earth at large” (Dieter Georgi).¹³² His scenario of the nations turning in faithful obedience to Israel’s Messiah was a peculiarly Israelite vision, informed by Israel’s scriptures. Those scriptures explicitly identified the Messiah as the one “who rises to rule the nations” (Isa 11:10), an irreducibly political phrase that Paul quotes at the climax of the chain of scriptures in Rom 15:7–13. His vision of the nations united under a single ruler echoed, and was probably shaped in response to, the imperial ideology of universal rule (*oikoumenē*)

that surrounded him. When Paul recounted the nations already caught up in his apostolic work, he showed that his understanding of the universality of God's rule involved a clearly territorial dimension, the physical specificity of which resembled the boundaries of the Roman Empire.¹³³ When he called upon the Romans to support "the offerings of the nations" which it was his priestly duty to gather and deliver in Jerusalem, he posed himself as the agent who would fulfill ancient scriptural visions of the nations bringing tribute to Israel (Isa 60:5-7; 66:20). But this language also *usurped an imperial prerogative*. It was the *Caesar* who rightly received "the gifts of the peoples" (*dona populorum*) as a matter of divine right, seated, in Virgil's eschatological fantasy, upon the throne of Apollo himself.¹³⁴

Beyond Ethnic Tensions

Paul's apostolic work was in inevitable conflict with the Augustan vision of the obedience of nations.¹³⁵ We miss that tension if we persist in reading Romans on strictly ethnic terms, as Paul's effort to smooth tensions arising between ethnic groups, Jews (or "Judeans") and Gentiles, and to promote a tolerant universalism between those groups. That reading enjoys tremendous popularity, especially in the so-called "New Perspective on Paul,"¹³⁶ and in two recent attempts to set the ethnic reading of Paul on firmer ground by appeal to social-scientific models. That reading does not do justice to Paul's rhetoric, however, and the social-scientific models of "ethnicity" are at best unconvincing.

In their *Social-Scientific Commentary on the Letters of Paul*, Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch contend that Paul's phrase "Judean and Greek" marks "a general binary division of the house of Israel." They read "Greek" not as an ethnic term ("there really were no Greek ethnics in the first century," they contend) but as referring to "a social status" meaning civilized, "the opposite of barbarian." On this account, there were two kinds of Israelites in the first century: *Judeans*, those who lived in Judea and its environs (or "people who followed the ancestral customs of Israel as practiced in Judea; emigré Judeans"), and *Greeks*, Israelites living anywhere else and participating in Hellenistic culture.¹³⁷ Malina and Pilch contend that "Paul's phrase 'Judeans and Greeks' . . . actually means 'barbarian (or Judean) Israelite and civilized Israelite.'" ¹³⁸ The result is a neat alignment of categories:

Judeans = barbarians (uncivilized Israelites, living in or around Judea)	Greeks = <i>ethnē</i> (Greek-speaking, civilized Israelites, living outside Judea)
--	--

According to Malina and Pilch, Paul identified as a Greek Israelite (as opposed to a barbarian Judean). His gospel of a raised Messiah and of an imminent "Israelite

theocracy” testify to his own “Israelite ethnocentrism,” which limited his mission to Greek-speaking Israelites, living outside of Judea, people like himself.¹³⁹ They deny that Paul’s mission involved the inclusion of Gentiles (or non-Israelites); rather, Paul anticipated that non-Israelites would recognize God’s vindication of Israelites and honor God (“because of what God does for his people, not for the Gentiles”).¹⁴⁰

Though Malina and Pilch are to be commended for emphasizing Paul’s ethnic identity as an Israelite, their proclivity to binary oppositions leads them to draw other, unlikely conclusions. Against their restriction of Paul’s mission to Israelites, we need only point to the explicit address of *ethnesin* as the audience of Romans (11:13).¹⁴¹ Their unfortunate equation of Judean and barbarian is based on a mistaken conflation of two phrases. Paul means something very specific by “barbarian,” as we will see below.

Philip F. Esler offers a very different social-science reading of Romans, according to which Paul seeks to offer rival ethnic groups an alternative “Christian identity” that transcends their ethnic differences. In contrast to Malina and Pilch, Esler (like most interpreters) recognizes that the Roman assembly includes both Judeans (whom he identifies readily with Israelites) and non-Judeans (*ethnē*). In order to attribute tensions to two rival ethnic groups, however, Esler must account for Paul’s repeated use of the term *ethnē*, which he recognizes was a Judean term for outsiders, but which he also recognizes was not a term that any group in the ancient world used to identify themselves. He suggests that by *ethnē*, Paul simply meant Greeks, which (in contrast to Malina and Pilch) he shows was in fact an ethnic self-description. The substitution allows him to read Romans as another example of the long-standing tensions between Judeans and Greeks in other places. He explains these tensions, by appeal to social-science models of ethnicity, as arising inevitably from the social dynamics of group formation,¹⁴² so that the simple proximity of Judeans and Greeks in Rome would inevitably have developed mutual competition, antagonism, and friction.¹⁴³ Like Malina and Pilch, Esler discounts the explicit address of Paul’s letter to *ethnesin*, “(representatives of) the nations,” but he does so to emphasize the importance of *both* Judean and Greek ethnic blocs in Roman house-churches.¹⁴⁴ Like them, he also conflates Paul’s phrases “the Judean (first) and also the Greek” (1:16; 2:9-10; 3:9; 10:12), with “Greeks and barbarians” (1:15)—though he holds back from equating barbarians and Judeans.¹⁴⁵

Despite the sophistication of the models Esler discusses, his discussion fails to take adequate account of the political context in which ethnic identities are constructed. The problem is endemic to many New Perspective studies on Paul. Too often, rich and complex discussions of political pressures on Jewish identity in the Roman world do not carry over to the interpretation of Paul; instead the apostle is simply posed over against Judaism in religious terms.¹⁴⁶ Part of the explanation is the lingering dominance of a liberal Christian theological agenda that poses Paul as the champion of an “intercultural,” “universalistic” religion, Christianity, over against an ethnically specific and chauvinistic religion, Judaism. As Denise Kimber Buell and Caroline Johnson Hodge make the point, interpreting Christian universalism as non-ethnic enables Christian anti-Judaism by defining a posi-

tive attribute of Christianity (universalism) at the expense of Judaism. Judaism is portrayed as everything Christianity is not: legalistic, ethnic, particular, limited, and so on. Often, they observe, Paul is positioned in such interpretation “as the evolutionary link between an ethnic and a non-ethnic, universal kind of religion. He is understood to be ‘ethnically’ a *Ioudaios*,” but at the same time he is read as either denying the significance of identity as a *Ioudaios* or as splitting the category *Ioudaios* “into a hierarchical pair,” the spiritual, inner, “true” *Ioudaios* (i.e., the Christian) being superior to the fleshly, outer, “false” *Ioudaios* (i.e., the Jew).¹⁴⁷ To the same point, Pamela Eisenbaum describes a tendency in New Perspective scholarship to read Paul as *ethnically* or *culturally* Jewish, a Jew *kata sarka* (“according to the flesh”), but theologically or religiously Christian.¹⁴⁸

I discuss Esler’s work because he represents the best motives of the New Perspective research. He seeks to avoid anti-Judaism in his interpretation of Paul. Indeed, he admits that Paul himself shared in the Judean “ethnocentrism” of his age.¹⁴⁹ But this only means that when Esler moves on, in ways quite familiar from traditional Christian theology, to *oppose* Paul to the ethnic presumption on which “Israel was built” and to the Jerusalem apostles who failed to transcend it, his work becomes something of the exception that proves the rule.¹⁵⁰ The problem is not just that the “ethnic” reading common in the New Perspective of Romans potentially “enables anti-Judaism” by trading in stereotypes about “ethnocentric” Judaism. It also represents a culture-transcending, ethnically uninflected “universalism” as an ideal, which the contemporary interpreter can occupy alongside “Paul,” over against the problematic ethnicity of others. Tat-Siong Benny Liew points out that discourse about “ethnicity” is often an only slightly more refined way of talking about race in Western societies: “it is often a label for groups who are not in power.” Liew calls for a postcolonial critique of such discourse, especially as it appears in biblical studies, that will “read race/ethnicity in a wider, international nexus of socio-cultural and colonial politics.”¹⁵¹

Esler is by no means the chief example of the sort of ethnic reading that Liew criticizes. To the contrary, at a general level Esler himself offers important insights toward a politically and historically contextualized reading of ethnicity. He recognizes that ethnic conflict has often arisen “in the colonial experience of indigenous peoples,” not surprisingly, “given that colonial policy helped” again and again to aggravate group distinctions arbitrarily and to set peoples against each other on the basis of those distinctions.¹⁵² He also recognizes that racial theories “pretend that divisions between people that are socially constructed, nearly always to allow one group to subjugate another, have some biological basis,” but that in this pretense they are revealed to be “a form of pseudo-science.”¹⁵³ But Esler does not extend these insights to discuss Roman policy toward Judeans;¹⁵⁴ instead he proceeds to discuss “ethnicity in the ancient Mediterranean world” in broadly general and essentialist terms.¹⁵⁵ When he does turn to one specific episode in Roman policy—the edict of Claudius which expelled (at least some) Judeans from Rome—he minimizes its significance as “unnecessary” to the interpretation of Romans, apparently because in his view, the ethnic tensions in Rome may be satisfactorily explained as arising solely from “mutual hostility between Judeans and Greeks”—a hostility for which

he offers no historical explanation.¹⁵⁶ The predominance of the category of ethnicity means that other interpretive categories, notably the political, are minimized.

Esler also draws attention because he explicitly acknowledges the ideological import of his work. He finds in Paul an important resource for facing concerns in the world today: “The contemporary issue driving the current study of Romans is the nature of Christian identity—that is, the question of what it means to be a Christian—in a world rent by violent, often murderous conflict between groups, *in particular those of an ethnic kind.*”¹⁵⁷ Esler declares that ethnic conflict is “one of the most pressing evils in our world,” and cites in illustration “the breakup of Yugoslavia during the years 1991–1994,” the 1994 massacre of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, and conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland.¹⁵⁸ His concerns are commendable.

But we might well ask why we should focus attention on conflicts “in particular . . . of an ethnic kind.” Indeed, we might well ask why ethnicity should be the primary category for understanding the specific conflicts Esler has named—or others, including the misery in occupied Iraq, routinely interpreted in Western media as the result of ethnic or sectarian strife. *Political*, and particularly *imperial*, forces influenced the construction of ethnic identity and exacerbated tensions between ethnic groups in the ancient Roman world. But just as surely, imperial powers shape and exacerbate ethnic conflicts today, just as they use ethnicity to mask the deeper economic and political realities of conflicts around the world—realities that these powers would likely rather not have examined.¹⁵⁹ It is not self-evident that we should construe conflicts in either era narrowly in terms of ethnicity and ethnic tension; nor that we should seek a solution in a supposed multicultural or universalist perspective that goes no further. To the contrary, any number of voices today call us to go on to ask “embarrassing questions” about the true nature of power relations in the “new world order” of actually existing capitalism. For example, Mamood Mamdani points out that the Western construction of “good” and “bad Muslims” masks “a refusal to address our own failure to make a political analysis of our times,” specifically an analysis that will take account of the dynamics of actually existing imperial and power structures. The point finds echoes around the world.¹⁶⁰

Ideological Constraints in Romans

The rhetoric that begins Romans itself points beyond ethnicity to the imperial construction of identity. Paul declares that he is “obligated both to Greeks and barbarians, to the educated and the unlettered” (1:14-15). It is a mistake to conflate these phrases (as do Malina and Pilch, Esler, and many others) with “Jew” and “Greek” or with “Israel” and “the nations.” The phrase “Greeks and barbarians” also has been read as a summary description of the non-Judean world.¹⁶¹ But it is more

to the point to observe that the phrase routinely is found on the lips of Romans (and Judeans under Roman rule) as they describe *the world's peoples as Rome's subjects*.¹⁶² Paul is not inviting different members of his audience to identify with one or another ethnic group. He is defying the imperial construction of peoples, and so he amplifies the phrase “Greeks and barbarians” with another phrase that we might fairly translate “the more and less civilized.” He evokes imperial categories—categories that will not appear again in this letter—precisely to show that his own obligation does not fall along the line of Rome’s “civilizing” mission.

The same defiance rings in his assertion that he is “not ashamed of the proclamation of God’s triumph, for it is God’s power” (1:16). We know better now than to hear this declaration as an expression of Paul’s insecurity, “uncertainty and embarrassment.” Robert Jewett writes that Paul here is refusing the shame that Roman culture would have attributed to him as the apostle of a crucified man.¹⁶³ Paul’s sharply ironic language regarding the “shame of the cross” in 1 Cor 1:18-31 shows that he rejected the definitions of honor and shame current among the Roman elite.¹⁶⁴ But we can say more. Honor and shame are always acutely contested in a colonial situation.¹⁶⁵ The refusal to be “put to shame” is the defiance of the social and political order in which shame is constructed; thus, for example, Socrates refused to admit “shame” before his Athenian accusers.¹⁶⁶ The Roman aristocracy shared a powerful sense of national honor, *gloria*, in the expansion of the Roman Empire, but attributed shame to the enemies of Rome.¹⁶⁷ The author of *4 Maccabees* responded by putting into the mouths of the Jewish martyrs under Antiochus IV the refusal to put themselves, the Torah, or their ancestors to shame; they refused the tyrant’s definition of what was reasonable, just, merciful—or shameful.¹⁶⁸ As Luise Schottroff observed, the protest of having nothing to be ashamed of was a requisite element in the genre of later Christian martyrologies as well.¹⁶⁹

Paul was “not ashamed of the proclamation of God’s triumph” simply because in it, *real* justice was seen, “the justice of God.” This was powerful, saving justice, experienced as genuine faithfulness between a faithful God and those who act in trusting obedience; it was the justice that Israel expected God to enact through the Messiah (Psalm 72).

Others have observed that Paul’s language about “faithful obedience among the nations” closely resembled the Hellenistic vision of nations united by a common enlightened civilization,¹⁷⁰ or closer to Paul’s own time, the Augustan vision of nations brought together in obedience to a single lord.¹⁷¹ But noticing such verbal and conceptual similarities must not obscure the fundamental difference. Paul states his clear purpose to bring the nations under obedience *to the God of Israel and his Messiah*. Recognizing the echoes of imperial *topoi* allows us to see that the contrast with the claims of empire is hardly incidental.

The burden of this chapter is to situate the rhetoric of Romans within the wider context of Roman discussions of coercion and consent, force and friendship, as the yoked instruments of imperial rule. The material dynamics of exploitation in the Roman Empire generated a fundamental ideological tension between the *order*

Rome achieved through force, and the claim of *justice* that Rome raised in order to win the hearts and minds of its subjects. Rome's use of force achieved peace for all, and so, within the imperial imagination, it made sense to erect the Altar of Augustan Peace on the field of Mars, the god of war who had brought Rome victory. Similarly it made sense, given imperial premises, for Augustus to boast that during his principate the Senate thrice ordered the gates of the temple of Janus closed, offering ritual demonstration that through warfare, war had been brought to an end. (Nero would copy the gesture, though with much less warrant.)¹⁷²

The same ideological tension, between *order* (*taxis*) and *justice* (*dikaiosynē*), shapes Romans. Paul shares with many of his contemporaries in the ideologically constructed horror of social disorder. Philo had earlier declared that the rumors of Caligula's having fallen ill filled the world with dread of "the many great evils which spring from anarchy."¹⁷³ Paul, too, held civil strife (*eritheia*) in great dread (Rom 2:8), and considered well-deserved the condemnation of any who "resisted authority" (13:2).¹⁷⁴ We might imagine that both these Judeans had seen enough of the terrible costs of civil unrest, as borne by the vulnerable Judean populations in both Alexandria and Rome. After all, Paul was not simply indulging a lyrical inclination when he wrote of "hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword" (8:35). But we also must recognize the thoroughly kyriarchal texture of his rhetoric in Romans as the effect of the ideological constraints of Roman imperialism.

Paul could not have joined Plutarch in exulting, with cheerful defiance of the historical record, in the "true freedom of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire." For Plutarch, the Roman Empire was different from all other empires in that "the Romans govern free men, not slaves."¹⁷⁵ For Paul, the world has been "subjected to futility" and "bondage to decay" (Rom 8:20-21). God's Spirit militates against that subjection through the "groaning," as of a woman in labor, in a creation yearning for its liberation. The Spirit also agitates among those who wait for "the glorious liberation of the children of God" and "the redemption of our bodies" (8:22-23).

But, if for Paul, God is the source of the world's coming liberation, *God is also the one who has imposed the present subjection* (8:20). Here we see the constraining power of kyriarchal ideology upon Paul's thought. At least implicitly, he opposes the reigning kyriarchy of Rome, and can speak with fervor of a coming liberation from it. But he seems incapable of imagining the end of Roman kyriarchy without describing the ascendancy of a new and better kyriarchy, that of the Messiah, the *kyrios*, who will subdue and rule, *archein*, over the nations with justice. He cannot describe the steps the elect might take toward the day of liberation; theirs is only to "wait for it with patience" (8:25). He does not dwell on the social characteristics of a redeemed world, and never describes the "glorious liberation" of the children of God as a realm of absolute freedom. A world without kyriarchy is for Paul almost unutterable.

Throughout the letter, Paul sets a *willing and consenting* obedience over against its opposite, an obedience *characterized by compulsion and submission*. Thus the

“faithful obedience of the nations” of which Paul speaks is described as a joining with Israel in joyful concert (15:9-13). The depraved obedience to dishonorable passions (1:21-26) stands in marked contrast with the willing obedience of renewed minds, not conformed to this world (12:1-2), and the exhortations that follow highlight the *willing* character of their obedience (12:3-9).

Disobedience is more than a failure to obey God. It is choosing to obey forces hostile to God, surrendering oneself to another, rival dominion, living under the compulsion of sin (*hyph' hamartian*, 3:9). Those who have through baptism left the dominion (*kyrieuein*) of death behind (6:9) are no longer to live as if “enslaved to sin” (*douleuein*, 6:6); they are no longer to let sin “reign” in their mortal bodies (*basileuein*) so that they obey (*hypakouein*) its passions (6:12-13). They have been “freed” from sin.

But this freedom is only possible because they have been *redeemed*, a metaphor from the slave market that retains its connotations for Paul. Thus, in baptism, they “were made slaves to justice” (*edoulōthēte tē dikaiosynē*, 6:12-23). They must “present” or “surrender” (*paristanein*) their members to God as the “war trophies” (*hopla*) of justice, becoming “obedient from the heart” (compare 12:1-2).

Thus, Paul does not imagine a realm of absolute freedom from constraint. Everyone is “accountable to God” (3:19); no human being enjoys absolute autonomy, but must inevitably serve (as a slave: *douleuein*) one reign (*basileuein*) or another. Adam’s disobedience (*paraptōma*) provided the occasion for the introduction of the “reign” of sin and death (*basileuein*, 5:17, 21); Christ’s obedience, literally his doing “what was right” (*dikaiōma*), ushered in the opposing “reign” (*basileuein*) of grace through justice (5:20). Freedom from obligation to the law—being no longer “under law” (*hypo nomou*, 6:15, cf. 3:19)—is not license to do sin, that is, to disobey God. This freedom is only possible to those who have died to the dominion that previously held them captive, that is, to the flesh (7:6), just as a widow is no longer bound by law to her deceased husband (7:1-5).¹⁷⁶ But no one enjoys absolute freedom from obligation. To the contrary, the law that once functioned as a “law of sin and death” now functions as “the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (8:2), and those who are in Christ are now enabled (and obligated) to fulfill its just requirement (*dikaiōma*, 8:4).

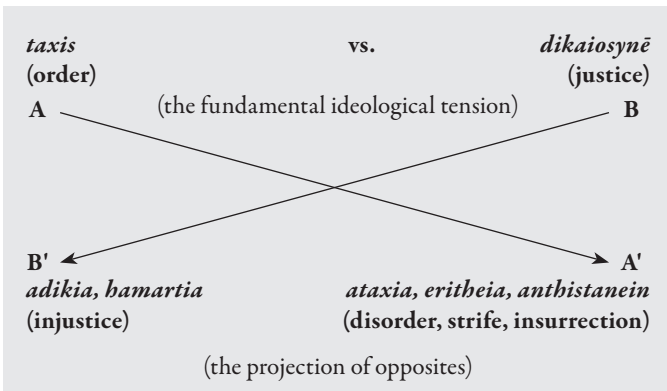
The tensions in this letter go far beyond the tensions within the exhortation to be subject to governing authorities (Rom 13:1-7) and the tensions between that passage and its epistolary context. The whole of the letter is riven by *ideological* tensions. Paul contrasts life in the flesh and life in the Spirit by saying that “the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law” (*ouch hypotassetai*, 8:7-8). The implication is that the life of the Spirit *does* “submit” to God. But moments later Paul declares that the Spirit (that is, *of* God) groans *against* subjection—the subjection of creation to corruption, which he then states, paradoxically, is subjection *to* God. Similarly, he declares that some fellow Judeans, though having a zeal for God, have sought to establish their own justice and thus failed “to submit to God’s justice” (10:3). The contrast established elsewhere in the

letter between willing obedience (*hypakoē*) and submission (*hypotassesthai*) here breaks down, as it does in Paul's assertion that God has "imprisoned everyone" in disobedience (11:32).

Fredric Jameson's proposal for ideological analysis allows us to recognize in this tension, which Paul fails to resolve, the effects of a greater ideological tension in the Roman order. The language of liberation in Romans 8 arises from a collective aspiration. For Paul, however, the thought of unfettered freedom remains a matter of "inward groaning," expressible only in "sighs too deep for words." It is, in the terms of Jameson's analysis, an *unutterable* thought, a thought that has been *repressed* into the collective "political unconscious" by the constraints of imperial ideology—yet irrupting here, if only for a moment, onto the surface of the text. The tensions evident on the surface of Romans point to the "strategies of containment" that function as ideological constraints in the Roman world, as Fig. 1.2 indicates.

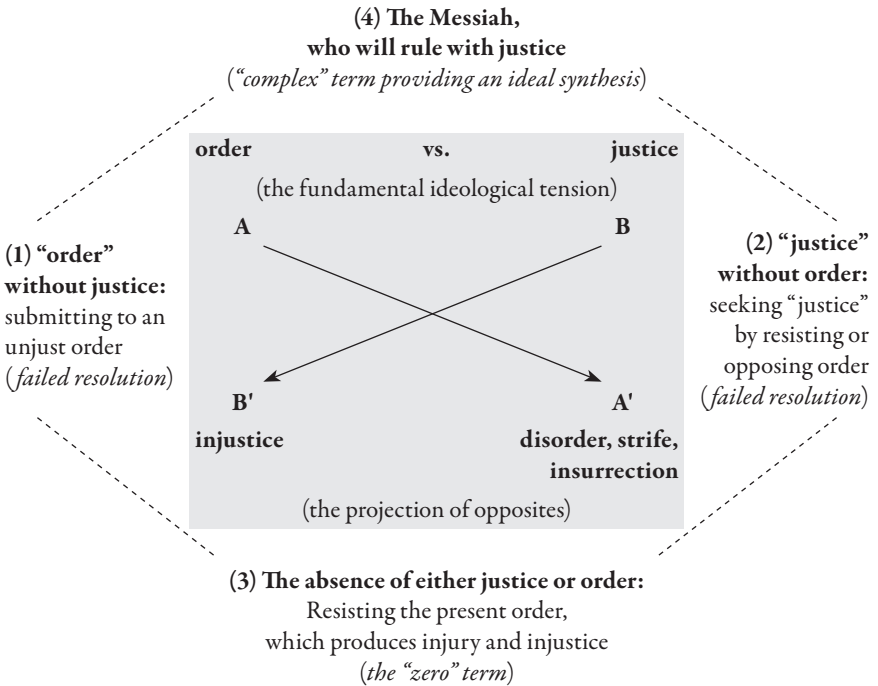
Jameson adapts A. Greimas's use of a "semiotic square" to map the indications of *ideological closure* within a text that are evident in the ways the text seeks to resolve "a dilemma, an aporia, . . . a concrete social contradiction."¹⁷⁷ I identify the fundamental tension in *Roman imperial ideology*, and (as an inevitable consequence) in *Paul's letter to the Romans* as well, as the tension between *order*, perceived as a necessity to be imposed by force, and *justice*, the claim that such force is right and legitimate. Jameson holds that the tensions at work in an ideological situation produce a "restless" effort to produce new terms to "ultimately 'solve' the dilemma at hand," first by projecting the opposites of the terms in tension in an imaginative "what if . . ." exercise. Thus, the social contradiction between order and justice projects the question, *What alternatives are there to justice, or to order, as presently experienced?*¹⁷⁸ In other words, is there any way to imagine justice being realized, apart from the present order, that is not simply the chaos of anarchy? Is there any imaginable social order, apart from the present pretension to justice, that is not simply another unjust imposition of power?

Fig. 1.2. Ideological tensions in the Roman Empire



Texts are generated, Jameson argues, at the point at which the collective energy that he calls the “political unconscious” seeks release from the ideological constraints of a situation “by projecting combinations” of the possible projected values. Thus, Fig. 1.3 represents, surrounding the values in tension (order, justice) and the projected countervalues (injustice, disorder), four possible resolutions.

Fig. 1.3. Ideological closure in Romans



As indicated in this diagram, two conceivable combinations, in Paul’s thinking, are unacceptable; that is, they are *failed solutions* to the ideological dilemma: (1) the premature acceptance of (Roman) order in the absence of justice, in terms of what historians of Judeans in the Roman world have called “accommodation”; and (2) the premature effort to achieve justice by a rejection of (Roman) order, as manifested in rebellion. It bears emphasizing that these are not theological judgments, made in the abstract or according to a priori principles. *They are possibilities projected and foreclosed by Paul’s historical experience—and the experience of many of his Judean contemporaries—of the material environment in which he and they lived.*

A third term (3) Jameson calls the “neutral” or “zero” term, the “union of purely negative or privative terms” in the initial contradiction. In the case of Romans, the imaginative question, *What if there were neither order nor justice?* is represented in just the intolerable situation that many scholars have suggested Paul anticipated in

Rome itself: namely, that his non-Judean hearers might take part in civil disturbances protesting Nero's tax policies, and thus put the embattled Judean community at even greater risk.¹⁷⁹

According to Jameson, the "complex term" (4) provides the "ideal synthesis" that is imagined to resolve the contradiction at the heart of the text. In the case of Romans, this "ideal synthesis" subsumes the initially contradictory terms, *order vs. justice*, in a new unity—the ideal order to be imposed by a truly just lord, the Messiah.

The benefit of adapting Jameson's work in this way is that it allows us to recognize some of Paul's judgments as the effects of *ideological constraints* in his situation. What is repressed from this system is, first, any notion of unrestricted freedom. The *kyriarchal* constraint on Paul's thought effectively distances Paul from many of his modern readers for whom democracy, equality, and the rights of the individual are sacrosanct; but it places him squarely alongside others of his contemporaries. For Paul, there is no realm of pure freedom; in its place, for Paul, is the dread of anarchy.

The diagram also helps us to interpret Paul's statements about *obedience as subjection*, including subjection to the present governing authorities. No other imagined conceptuality seemed capable of resolving the fundamental tension in Paul's situation: neither accommodation nor rebellion, nor the dread prospect of *eritheia*, self-interested and socially destructive lawlessness. This is due to *specific* historical and ideological circumstances I shall have occasion to explore further below. Paul was therefore compelled to imagine that endurance and subjection were, *for the present*, appropriate. (I note that endurance, *hypomonē*, which appears throughout the letter, was a hallmark virtue in the apocalypses as well, beginning with Daniel.¹⁸⁰) Paul could imagine subjection to the governing authorities as coinciding with obedience to God, because he imagined that the governing authorities themselves had been subjected to God ("they have been set in order under God," *hypo theou tetagmenai eisin*, 13:1). But he did not recount any narrative in which that subjection had taken place. Nor did he propose to examine whether actual Roman magistrates were aware of their responsibility, or whether they had carried out their obligations in the course of carrying out their duties. The point is one of *ideological necessity*, given the constraints just described. It is inconceivable, "unutterable," for Paul that God might *not* be in control—even of the governing authorities that he could describe in 1 Corinthians 2 as being hostile to God.

But this means that Paul did not intend to enjoin subordination or subjection as a *permanent state of affairs*. Paul could not imagine that the Roman order should long endure (see Rom 13:11-14). That Roman power should remain the decisive political reality for the indefinite future and that the subjection to Rome that he recommended should mean continued subjection to an unjust, exploitative, and violent order—this possibility, too, was intolerable for Paul, and thus repressed from consideration in Romans 13.

As the catastrophe recorded in Acts 21–28 makes abundantly clear, Paul did not know the future. To read his exhortations as if he were responding to a universe in which the Romans, or some other conqueror, naturally held dominion in perpetuity, is thoroughly anachronistic and reveals more about the contemporary interpreter's assumptions than about Paul's.¹⁸¹ But neither do we, on an ideological reading, have the luxury of retreating into theological abstractions, attributing Paul's messianism either to his privileged supra-historical insight (revelation) or to his religious genius. *Like other Judeans of his time*, Paul embraced a messianic and apocalyptic viewpoint, informed by Israel's scriptures, as a way of perceiving the material and ideological realities of Roman imperialism. But that historical observation simply extends the question to take in many of Paul's contemporaries as well.

Jameson's discussion of the "political unconscious" allows a different perspective on Romans. The more interesting question, from the perspective of ideological criticism, is not *Why did Paul enjoin subjection to Rome?* but *What enabled Paul to speak, in the same letter, of an alternative?* To invoke the Spirit of God as a force striving against the bondage of the present order, to try to articulate the Spirit's unutterable yearnings for liberation—these aspects of Romans should give us pause. As James C. Scott poses the larger question, "how is it that subordinate groups . . . have so often believed and acted as if their situations were *not* inevitable when a more judicious historical reading would have concluded that it was?" Scott's own answer is that "if the elite-dominated public transcript tends to naturalize domination, it would seem that *some countervailing influence* manages often to *denaturalize* domination."¹⁸²

Scott offers no further explanation of that "countervailing influence." In Romans 8, Paul names it the Holy Spirit. We would be hard-pressed to describe the groans of the Spirit in terms of the rhetorical handbooks, or by reference to the *topoi* of imperial ideology as these were engaged in the public transcript. The groans of the Spirit, "as of a woman in labor," clearly have a decisive place in the letter, nonetheless. An attentive reading must give account of those groans as much as of the ideological constraints against which they were—and are—exerted.