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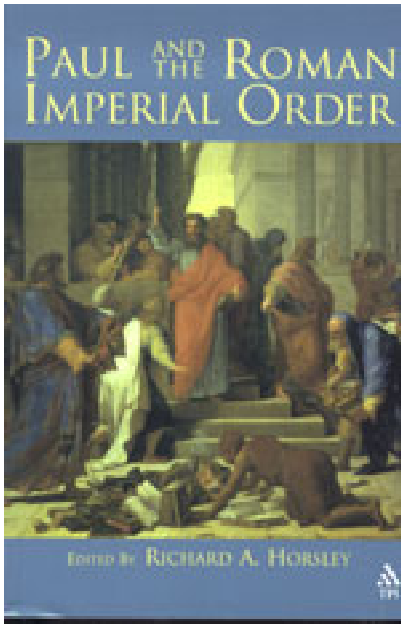

Horsley, Richard A., ed.

Paul and the Roman Imperial Order

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For the most part, modern scholars have viewed Paul's writings as in dialogue with Judaism. He was, after all, a Pharisee who was thoroughly familiar with Jewish modes of thinking. Moreover, Jesus Christ himself was born in a Jewish family and spent most of his life in first-century Galilee and Judea. Early Christianity was seen as a sect of Judaism, and Paul entered debates with other Jewish Christians as to how much of the Old Testament law followers of Jesus were expected to adhere to. Many scholars in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries even argued that the letters of the New Testament reflect a battle between the thinking of Paul and James—between those who insisted on freedom from the law and those who preached strict adherence to the law.

More recently, scholars have seen less of a conflict between Paul and traditional Jewish understanding of the role of the law in the life of God's people. But what few scholars have done is to see Paul's locus of controversy as the Roman imperial order and, in particular, politics on the local level. Richard Horsley, however, has been investigating this topic. He has edited two previous books on this area: *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (1997) and *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (2000); to these two books can now be added the present volume. This book grew out of Paul and Politics Group of the Society of Biblical

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Literature, which discussed the topic of "Paul and the Imperial Roman Order" at their Annual Meeting in 2000 in Nashville. Four of the essays in this book were first presented at that session, and to these have been added several more essays from other reputable scholars. Classical historian Simon R. F. Price, who published *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* in 1984, writes an appreciative brief response at the end of the book. Each of the essays in some way shows how Paul's "gospel and mission stood sharply opposed to Caesar and the Roman imperial order, and not to the Jewish Law" (5).

Robert Jewett's "The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Reading Rom 8:18–23 within the Imperial Context" demonstrates how Rom 8:18–23 depicts the natural world as far from idyllic and certainly not restored by the Roman imperium. The Roman premise was that the corruption of nature came about through barbarians and rebels and that a new golden age was arising through Roman conquest and the extension of piety. For Paul, however, the creation "was subjected to futility" because of Adam's sin, and its restoration is not taking place through a *pax Romana* engineered by Augustus and his successors but will occur only at "the revealing of the children of God," who are awaiting, in hope, their complete redemption and liberation through Christ.

In " 'Unmasking the Powers': Toward a Postcolonial Analysis of 1 Thessalonians," Abraham Smith rereads 1 Thessalonians "against some of the conventions of power in the Roman imperial world" (49). He deals specifically with 2:13–16 and 5:1–11. Smith argues that in the former passage "Paul is criticizing the pro-Roman aristocracy in Thessalonica by way of an analogy with the pro-Roman rulers of Judea" (60). While some may dispute his interpretation of this difficult pericope, few will contest that in the latter passage Paul is attacking the thesis that "peace and security" have come through Rome. Rather, they will come on the Day of the Lord, when God alone will manifest his universal rule as the "God of peace" (5:23).

Neil Elliott, in "The Apostle Paul's Self-Presentation as Anti-Imperial Performance," shows how "Paul describes his own apostolic activity as the manifestation of divine power" (72). For example, Paul's constant reference to his afflictions, humiliation, and being led in triumphal procession, which the Romans would have viewed as evidence of weakness, is instead the locus of God's power. Through such activity God is glorified and God's power in Christ is displayed. The crucifixion itself is a demonstration of God's power—not as an isolated event, of course, but as an event completed by the resurrection. " 'Showing forth the Lord's death' thus constitutes a ritual gesture of defiance, a refusal to allow the Empire's exhibition of a crucified corpse to be determinative of the future of Jesus, or of the creation" (84).

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Rollin A. Ramsaran's contribution is entitled "Resisting Imperial Domination and Influence: Paul's Apocalyptic Rhetoric in 1 Corinthians." While I would take issue with Ramsaran's three-part rhetorical structure of this letter, there is little doubt that Paul criticizes certain elements of the church in Corinth for trying to use the methods of the Roman imperial order to gain power and influence in the church. By contrast, Paul insists, the church should remain distinct from the surrounding dominant oppressive culture. Moreover, the vindication of the faithful will take place not through political means but through the resurrection from the dead (1 Cor 15), when the ultimate kingdom will arrive. Rome will not bring in the final glorious kingdom; the resurrected Jesus will at his return.

Efrain Agosto writes a fascinating essay on "Patronage and Commendation: Imperial and Anti-Imperial." Patronage was a common phenomenon in the Roman world. Through this system, local rulers and elites used their wealth to sponsor the imperial cult, which they in turn hoped would bring them favors from Rome. One of the main ways in which the imperial patronage system was furthered was through letters of recommendation. Such letters were instruments of power in the Roman Empire. Paul, as is well known, also wrote letters of recommendation (Agosto discusses five of them), but the apostle turned this system on its head. Roman letters of commendation had essentially selfish motives, for patrons recommended their clients to higher-level patrons who had the power to advance the careers of both. Paul, however, commended those who worked hard and selflessly on behalf of the church communities "so that they [were] better able to survive repression and persecution by local and imperial rulers" (123).

In "Phil 2:6–11 and Resistance to Local Timocratic Rule: *Isa theō* and the Cult of the Emperor in the East," Erik M. Heen discusses how the expression *isa theō* must be read against the background of the imperial cult. In fact, this phrase expresses a criticism of the emperor. In Paul's day, the imperial cult, particularly in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, awarded divine honors to the emperor and his family (and this cult was particularly well developed in Philippi). To ascribe divine honors to anyone else would have been politically foolish, yet this is precisely what Paul writes about Jesus in Phil 2:6. Moreover, this divine status was granted to Jesus as a result of his life of service to God and others—precisely the reasons why divine honors were ascribed to the emperors. "In their assemblies, the followers of Christ may have sung that is was Jesus *rather than* the emperor who was deserving of the honorific *isa theō*" (139).

Finally, in "Paul and the Politics of Virtue and Vice," Jennifer Wright Knust shows how Paul offers a critique of the morality of the entire Greco-Roman world. Greek and Romans poets, philosophers, and historians evaluated their rulers by their virtues, and such virtues legitimated their authority to rule. Caesar Augustus especially was seen as

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setting the moral standard for a good emperor, having restored Roman mores. "In such a context, Paul's claim that those who do not accept Christ are characterized by fornication, 'unnatural intercourse,' and out-of-control passion can be read as a critique of both emperor and the Empire" (162). Apart from Christ, Paul argues, people are wicked, licentious, and greedy, incapable of ruling either themselves or others. As Rom 6 indicates, only through Christ can one gain control of one's "members" and present them "to God as instruments of righteousness" (Rom 6:14). In the second half of her essay, however, Knust criticizes Paul for his acceptance of the hierarchical configuration of sex, gender, and status that had served to uphold imperial claims to legitimacy.

The essays in the book are both insightful and fascinating. While I am not ready to suggest that we can forget about Paul's Jewish background in interpreting his letters and his theology, this book offers an added dimension that should be taken into account when seeking to understand the historical and cultural background against which Paul is writing. Who would think that Paul's very use of the word *ekklēsia* for the emerging believing communities would have political implications? The Roman imperium had been trying to foreclose the use of this word in the Greek world, where it had played such a dominant role in their political history. Yet, Paul championed this word as that which best described the communities he was forming.

Moreover, while this is not a strong voice in this book, I believe its thesis adds credence to the book of Acts, which records persecution of Paul and Christians by the Roman imperial authorities for political reasons. Note, for example, the charges brought to the authorities against Paul and the brothers in Thessalonica in Acts 17:7: "They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus." According to the text, such passages do reflect the animosity of the synagogue leaders in Thessalonica (17:5), but perhaps even more they have as their background real fears on the part of the ruling authorities that Paul was out to challenge the existing imperial order with an alternate divine king and an alternate kingdom.

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