Center of Theological Inquiry

Reflections

Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire

If Paul's answer to Caesar is the empire of Jesus, what is an empire under the rule of this new lord? How does Paul's gospel line up with Caesar's empire?

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I am honoured to be lecturing in this famous institution, and my wife and I are deeply grateful for the welcome and hospitality that you have showered upon us. In particular, as one who has been out of academic institutional life now for five years, I relish the prospect that an occasion like this provides for interaction with colleagues and friends from various disciplines.

I take as my topic a subject at the leading edge of a major branch of New Testament studies. The most exciting developments today in the study of St Paul and his thought are not, I think, the recent works on what is usually called Paul's Theology. [1] I would highlight, rather, the study of the interface and conflict between Paul's gospel, the message about the crucified Jesus, and the world in which his entire ministry was conducted, the world in which Caesar not only held sway but exercised power through his divine claim. What happens when we line up Paul's gospel with Caesar's empire?

Let me begin with a brief sketch of a recent work which pinpoints exactly these issues. This will open the way for four exegetical studies, three quite brief and one somewhat fuller, which will state the basic case I want to put to you, and lead to five concluding reflections.

Paul and Empire: Current Thinking

Just over a year ago, a book was published which raised these questions in a fresh and stimulating way. The book is called *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*. It is edited by Richard Horlsey and published by Trinity Press International [2] There is

much that I could say about this book, but one thesis from it stands out starkly. The evidence now available, including that from epigraphy and archaeology, shows that the cult of Caesar was not simply one new religion among many in the Roman world. Already by Paul's time it had become the dominant cult in a large part of the Empire, certainly in the parts where Paul was active, and was the means whereby the Romans managed to control and govern such huge areas as came under their sway. Who needs armies when they have worship?

The book thus invites us to approach what has been called Paul's theology, and to find in it, not simply a few social or political «implications», to be left safely to the final chapters of a lengthy theological tome3 [3] , but a major challenge to precisely that imperial cult and ideology which was part of the air Paul and his converts breathed. His missionary work, it appears (I am here summing up in my own way what I take to be the book's central thrust), must be conceived not simply in terms of a traveling evangelist offering people a new religious experience, but of an ambassador for a king-in-waiting, establishing cells of people loyal to this new king, and ordering their lives according to his story, his symbols, and his praxis, and their minds according to his truth. This could only be construed as deeply counter-imperial, as subversive to the whole edifice of the Roman Empire; and there is in fact plenty of evidence that Paul intended it to be so construed, and that when he ended up in prison as a result of his work he took it as a sign that he had been doing his job properly.

So far, I am in more or less complete agreement with the thesis that the book propounds, and I am grateful to Horsley and his colleagues for pointing us in this direction. Our own time, I think, is ripe for a reconsideration of the imperial cultic context of Paul's work and thought, not simply as one topic among others but as a theme which will colour and redirect the whole. My aim today is to open the question up in a way which I hope will stimulate further thought, fresh exegesis, and fresh constructions of Paul's agenda and theology; perhaps also of our own. I should add that I do have several quite serious reservations about the book, but the time for airing those is in a review, not in a fresh proposal. All of which leads us to the text of Paul, and to our four specific issues.

Jesus Christ is Lord:
Exegetical Studies in Paul's Counter-Imperial Gospel

«gospel»

I begin with the word «gospel» itself. I have argued at length elsewhere that the word «gospel» carries two sets of resonances for Paul. [4] On the one hand, the gospel Paul preached was the fulfilment of the message of Isaiah 40 and 52, the message of comfort for Israel and of hope for the whole world, because YHWH, the god of Israel, was returning to Zion to judge and redeem. On the other hand, in the context into which Paul was speaking, «gospel» would mean the celebration of the accession, or birth, of a king or emperor. Though no doubt petty kingdoms might use the word for themselves, in Paul's world the main «gospel» was the news of, or the celebration of, Caesar.

It is important to stress, as Paul would do himself were he not so muzzled by his interpreters, that when he referred to «the gospel» he was not talking about a scheme of soteriology. Nor was he offering people a new way of being what we would call «religious». Despite the way

Protestantism has used the phrase (making it denote, as it never does in Paul, the doctrine of justification by faith), for Paul «the gospel» is the announcement that the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's Messiah and the world's Lord. It is, in other words, the thoroughly Jewish, and indeed Isaianic, message which challenges the royal and imperial messages in Paul's world.

It is not difficult to see how this «gospel» functions for Paul. Theologically, it belongs completely with Isaiah's ringing monotheistic affirmations that YHWH and YHWH alone is the true god, the only creator, the only sovereign of the world, and that the gods of the nations are contemptible idols whose devotees are deceived, at best wasting their time and at worst under the sway of demons. Politically, it cannot but have been heard as a summons to allegiance to «another king», which is of course precisely what Luke says Paul was accused of saying (Acts 17.7). Practically, this means that Paul, in announcing the gospel, was more like a royal herald than a religious preacher or theological teacher. The appropriate response to the gospel can be stated in terms of «belief»: the announcement included the claim that the true God had raised Jesus from the dead. Or it can be stated in terms of «obedience»: it was a direct summons to abandon other allegiances and give total loyalty to this Jesus. Or, as in Romans 1.5 and elsewhere, these two can be combined, as Paul speaks, without feeling the need to cover his back against misinterpretation, of «the obedience of faith».

What then is the content of this gospel? What is Paul's claim about Jesus?

Jesus: King and Lord

The question of Paul's Christology has regularly been raised in terms of whether or not Paul thought Jesus was «divine», and if so in what sense. This is important, but not more important than the prior question: did Paul think that Jesus was Messiah, and did he make this thematic in his theology?

For generations now the received wisdom has been that Jesus' Messiahship plays little or no role in Paul's thinking. Granted, he uses the word *Christos* all the time, but most have reckoned that it had become for him a mere proper name, with only one or two occurrences, such as Romans 9.5, where the old Jewish meaning peeped out of hiding. This essentially dejudaized reading of Paul's use of *Christos* gained its apparent force from a history-of-religions argument, explicit or implicit: since Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, and since the Gentile world was looking for a cult-figure, a *Kyrios*, a Lord, there would have been no interest in a Jewish Messiah, and Paul himself had in any case left far behind such Jewish notions, bound up as they were with a narrow ethnocentric theology. [5] Alternatively, it is easy to suggest that, because the notion of messiahship carried overtones of violent military struggle, Paul wanted nothing to do with it.

I have argued elsewhere that this construal is entirely wrong. [6] It makes better sense of passage after passage to understand Christos as specifically «Messiah», the king of Israel, who sums up his people in himself, so that what is true of him is true of them.

What the older history-of-religions argument failed to reckon with was the Jewish understanding that, precisely because of Israel's status within the purposes of the creator god, *Israel's king was always supposed to be the world's true king*. «His dominion shall be from one sea to the other;

from the River to the ends of the earth» (Ps. 72.8). [7] «The root of Jesse shall rise to rule the nations; in him shall the nations hope» (Isa. 11.10, cited Rom. 15.12). Paul endorsed this train of thought, and he believed it to have been fulfilled in Jesus. He knew, of course, that Jesus was very different from the other Messiahs who flit through first-century history, but it is precisely part of the characteristic tension of his whole theology to claim that this crucified Jesus was and is the Jewish Messiah promised in scripture. Nor was this a hindrance to the Gentile mission, but rather its starting-point. What the Gentiles needed and longed for, whether they knew it or not, was the Jewish Messiah, who would bring the just and peaceful rule of the true God to bear on the whole world.

Romans 15.12, where the Isaiah passage just mentioned is quoted, is in fact right at the final climax of the long argument of Romans. This is often ignored, partly because Romans 12-16 often receive short shrift from expositors already exhausted by the previous eleven chapters, but also because of the assumption that Messiahship is irrelevant to Paul's theology. The quotation, however, closes the enormous circle that began with Romans 1.3-4, where Paul looks for all the world as though he is giving a deliberate summary of what his «gospel» actually contains.

This passage, too, is often marginalised, and for a similar reason: expositors are eager to get into what has been seen as the real meat of Paul's argument, and the fact that the passage is so obviously messianic has caused it to be set aside by those who suppose Paul to have been uninterested in messianism. On the face of it, though, the text appears to summarize what Paul means by «the gospel», and at its heart we find the Davidic Messiahship of Jesus. The phrase «son of God», though pregnant with other overtones too, has Davidic Messiahship as its primary meaning, with echoes of Psalm 2.7 and 2 Samuel 7.14 in the back ground. The resurrection has installed Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah of Israel, and therefore also the Lord to whose allegiance the world is now summoned. That is the burden of his song, the thrust of his *euangelion*. However scandalous to Jews and foolish to Gentiles, this is the royal announcement that, from Paul's point of view, fulfils the prophecies of scripture, and subverts the imperial gospel of Caesar. I propose that this reading of Romans 1.3-4, though always in fact exegetically the most likely, receives substantial support when we set it in the wider context of Paul's gospel seen as a royal proclamation aimed at challenging other royal proclamations.

If Jesus is Messiah, he is of course also Lord, *Kyrios*. The proper contexts for this term, too, are its Jewish roots on the one hand and its pagan challenge on the other. Taking them the other way round for the moment: the main challenge of the term, I suggest, was not to the world of private cults or mystery-religions, where one might be initiated into membership of a group giving allegiance to some religious «lord». The main challenge was to the lordship of Caesar, which, though certainly «political» was also profoundly «religious». Caesar demanded worship as well as «secular» obedience; not just taxes, but sacrifices. He was well on the way to becoming the supreme divinity in the Greco-Roman world, maintaining his vast empire not simply by force, though there was of course plenty of that, but by the development of a flourishing religion that seemed to be trumping most others either by absorption or by greater attraction. Caesar, by being a servant of the state, had provided justice and peace to the whole world. He was therefore to be hailed as Lord, and trusted as Savior. This is the world in which Paul announced that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, was Savior and Lord. [8]

We shall presently examine a key passage, Philippians 3.20f., in which that claim is made in all its starkness. We must note here the Jewish context within which Paul uses the word «lord» of Jesus. At one level, he is drawing on the biblical portrait of the truly human one. In 1 Corinthians 15.25-8, he combines Psalm110.1 and Psalm 8.7 in order to predicate of Jesus the Messiah that which Psalm 8 says of the human being. God has put all things under the feet of the human figure; so too of the Jewish Messiah. But the Lordship that Jesus has thereby attained is not simply that promised to humans in the beginning. In several passages, when Paul ascribes Lordship to Jesus, using of course the word *Kyrios*, he has in mind the Septuagintal use of the word in place of the unsayable Tetragrammaton,YHWH. [9] One of the best examples is in Philippians 2, where Paul declares, through a deliberate quotation of Isaiah, that what YHWH had claimed as unique was now shared with Jesus. «To me, me alone,» says YHWH, «every knee shall bow, every tongue swear». Maybe, says Paul, but now «at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.» [10]

Paul's most frequent language for Jesus, then, remained rooted in his Jewish traditions, asserting on the one hand that Jesus was the Messiah, long promised in the prophetic scriptures, bringing Israel's destiny to its god-ordained climax, and on the other that Jesus was Lord, both in the sense that he had embodied God's appointed destiny for the human race and in the sense that in him Israel's unique God had become personally present, accomplishing that which in scripture only God can accomplish. Simultaneously, and precisely because of the inner dynamic of just this Jewish tradition, Paul was announcing that Jesus was the true King of Israel and hence the true Lord of the world, at exactly the time in history, and over exactly the geographical spread, where the Roman emperor was being proclaimed, in what styled itself a «gospel», in very similar terms. The mainstream Jewish monotheistic critique of paganism, of all its idolatry and immorality, found in Paul's day a more focussed target, and in Paul's theology a sharper weapon.

God's Justice Revealed in the Gospel: Romans

The third of our brief exegetical studies takes us once more to Romans. When the gospel is announced, says Paul, God's righteousness is unveiled.

We have neither time nor space to delve into the detailed discussion that this warrants. [11] I want to stress one point only. The «righteousness of God», Paul's central theme in Romans, faces both ways. Rooted totally in his world of apocalyptic Judaism, it stakes a claim to be the reality of which Caesar's world offers the parody. The Jewish context of Paul's work makes it certain that by «God's righteousness» Paul means, not a status which God imputes, imparts or otherwise bestows upon humans, but God's own righteousness, meaning by that God's faithfulness to the covenant with Israel, the Abrahamic covenant reaffirmed in Deuteronomy and elsewhere. According to this covenant faithfulness, the God of Israel must somehow not only be true to the covenant promises but also remain impartial, with no favourites, and also not only deal properly with evil but rescue the helpless. This God must, in other words, act as the righteous judge in the cosmic law court. Things must be put to rights.

But this shows that the other obvious meaning of *dikaiosyne*, namely «justice», is not far away. Not only does the same Greek word cover both. The sense of covenant faithfulness and the sense of things being put to rights, held apart within both reformation and enlightenment thought as «theology and ethics», or «salvation and politics», were not far removed in the mind of a Jew

like Paul. Just as the Messiah was destined to be Lord of the world, so, and for the same reasons, God's covenant with Israel had always been intended as the means of putting God's world to rights. [12] When, therefore, God's righteousness was unveiled, the effect would be precisely that the world would receive justice: that rich, restorative, much-to-be-longed-for justice of which the Psalmists had spoken with such feeling. [13] Even a quick mental skim through Romans ought to reveal that this is indeed what Paul was talking about, though of course full justification of the point would demand a commentary.

But we need to remind ourselves where Paul's great letter was sent to. [14] Looming up behind the various discussions of why Romans was written is an issue not normally noticed. Paul was coming to Rome with the gospel message of Jesus the Jewish Messiah, the Lord of the world, claiming that, through this message, God's justice was unveiled once and for all. Rome prided itself on being, as it were, the capital of Justice, the source from which Justice would flow throughout the world. The Roman goddess *Iustitia*, like the Caesar-cult itself, was a comparative novelty in Paul's world: the temple to *Iustitia* was established on January 8, CE 13, and *Iustitia* was among the virtues celebrated by Augustus' famous *clipeus virtutis*, the golden shield set up in the Senate-house and inscribed with the emperor's virtues (27 BCE). So close is the link between the new imperial regime and the virtue *Iustitia* that this goddess sometimes acquires the title «Augusta». [15] So, without losing any of its deep-rooted Jewish meanings of the covenant faithfulness of the creator God, with all that this means for God's dealing with sins and justification of those who believe, Paul's declaration that the gospel of King Jesus reveals God's dikaiosyne must also be read, I suggest, as a deliberate laying down of a challenge to the imperial pretension. If it's justice you want, you will find it, not in the *euangelion* that announces Caesar as Lord, but in the *euangelion* of Jesus. The rest of Romans, were there time even to whisk through it, would show that this meaning is indeed intended at point after point.

The gospel of the true God, then, unveils the covenant faithfulness of this God, through which the entire world receives health-giving, restorative justice. That is the context within which, according to Romans, those who believe the gospel—who respond to the proclamation, that is, with «the obedience of faith»—are marked out by that faith, and by nothing else, as the eschatological people of God, the people whose sins have been dealt with on the cross, the people now assured of salvation/glorification. Nothing that I have said about what we might call the political dimension of Paul's argument should obscure for a moment that the message of the gospel is good news for sinners. Rather, that emphasis should be highlighted and celebrated *within* the framework of God's triumph in Christ over all the principalities and powers. Nothing, not even Caesar's system, can separate us from God's love shown in the Messiah, Jesus.

A footnote on Romans 13.1-7. Within the broad-brush ethical exhortations of chs. 12-13, Paul argues that, however much the emperor may proclaim himself to be sovereign, without rival in the divine as well as the human sphere, he remains answerable to the true God. Reminding the emperor's subjects that the emperor is responsible to the true God is a diminution of, not a subjection to, imperial arrogance. But if this is so, then the Christian owes to the emperor, not indeed the worship Caesar claimed, but appropriate civil obedience. The subversive gospel is not designed to produce civil anarchy. [16]

All of which leads us to our fourth and final exegetical study. I have alluded more than once to the third chapter of Philippians. I now want to propose a new way of reading that chapter as a whole.

Paul's Coded Challenge to Empire: Philippians 3

The third chapter of Philippians presents the exegete with several puzzles, which we cannot look at in detail. I want to offer a reading of the chapter which advances considerably the thesis I have been arguing overall about Paul's gospel and Caesar's empire, and throws into relief the related question of Paul's attitude to non-Christian Judaism.

We may begin with 3.20. «Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await the Saviour, the Lord Jesus, the Messiah». These are Caesar-titles. The whole verse says: Jesus is Lord, and Caesar isn't. Caesar's empire, of which Philippi is a colonial outpost, is the parody; Jesus' empire, of which the Philippian church is a colonial outpost, is the reality. [17] And the point of having «citizenship in heaven», as has often been pointed out, is not that one might eventually go home to the mother city; Rome established colonies precisely because of overcrowding in the capital, and the desire to spread Roman civilization in the rest of the empire. The point was that, if things were getting difficult in one's colonial setting, the emperor would come from the mother city to rescue and liberate his loyal subjects, transforming their situation from danger to safety. [18] Paul's description of Jesus, and his future saving activity, thus echoes what can be called imperial eschatology, even while being obviously derived from the same Jewish sources as was 1 Corinthians 15.25-8.

What is the immediate significance of this Jesus-and-Caesar contrast? It was of course a challenge to an alternative loyalty. Jesus is the reality, Caesar the parody. It was the legitimation of the Christian church as the true empire of the true Lord. And it was the outworking of the great poem (if that is what it is) in the previous chapter. The poem in chapter 2 has exactly the same shape as some formulaic imperial acclamations: Jesus, not Caesar, has been a servant, and is now to be hailed as *Kyrios*.

But if chapter 3 thus concludes with such a clear evocation of, and challenge to, imperial ideology and eschatology, how does this fit with the earlier parts of the chapter, for so long simply read as just another Pauline outburst against Jews in general or Jewish Christians in particular (so-called; we must never tire of reminding ourselves that Paul was himself a Jewish Christian)?

The solution I propose is that Paul, for neither the first nor the last time, has Judaism and paganism—particularly, in this case, the Caesar-cult—simultaneously in mind, and is here using warnings against the former (Judaism) as a code for warnings against the latter (paganism). Paul's main concern here, I suggest, is not to warn the Philippians against Judaism or an anti-Pauline Jewish-Christian mission. We have, after all, no hard evidence that this danger threatened the churches in Greece as it had those in Asia. His concern is to warn them against the Caesar-cult, and the entire panoply of pagan empire; but his method of warning them, and of encouraging them to take a stand for the counter-empire of Jesus, is given for the most part in code. He tells them his own story, the story of how he had abandoned his status and privileges in

order to find the true status and privilege of one in Christ, and encourages them to imitate him. Read this way, the chapter gains both in coherence and in subtlety.

First, coherence. «To write the same things», he says in verse 1, «is no trouble for me, and it is safe for you». Why «safe»? Because, I suggest, nobody reading verses 2-16 would at once deduce that the recipients of the letter were being encouraged to be disloyal to Caesar. Of course, anyone paying attention would recognise what was going on in verses 20-21, but the main thrust of the chapter is not to present a stark contrast between the two Lords of the world, but to provide the Philippians with a powerful train of thought and to encourage them to live within it. «Join in imitating me», Paul says in verse 17; but of course, not being Jews, they cannot; indeed, even if they had been Jews, they could hardly match Paul's top-drawer level of Jewishness (vv. 4-6). The rhetoric of the chapter does not simply give them orders; it encourages them to think their way into Paul's situation, and then to transfer what he says about himself and his own privileges to their own position and status. Paul is not, in fact, shifting his target; he is using one warning as a powerful code for another.

Second, subtlety. Paul builds up in verses 2-11 the argument which will then resound through to verse 21, with 10-11 anticipating the final climax of 20-21. There then follows, in verses 12-16, the warning against complacency, the danger to which recognition of the future hope is the antidote. The final appeal is made negatively in verses 17-19 and positively in verses 20-21. By this time, of course, both themes—the warning against Judaism, and the warning against Caesar's empire and its blasphemous parody of Jesus' Lordship—have come together, so that, as expositors have noticed, it is possible to read verses 17-19 almost equally well as a scathing denunciation both of non-Christian Jews and of the pagan world and its cults, familiar both to the Philippians and to the well-travelled apostle to the Gentiles.

What, then, is Paul saying in verses 2-11? The old debate as to whether Paul was opposing Judaism per se or a form of Jewish Christianity akin to that of the Galatian «agitators» is, I think, skewed in recent discussion by the anxious attempt to protect Paul from saying anything apparently derogatory about Jews, and the balancing attempt in some quarters to have him say as many snide things as possible about some of his fellow-Christians. These contemporary concerns have often obscured the underlying thrust, which is both subtle in itself and fascinating when we come to apply it to the wider polemic which, I am suggesting, the chapter is offering. Once again, part at least of the clue is found in the way in which these verses, too, look back to 2.5-11.

I believe Paul intended the first level of meaning of verses 2-6 to be about Jews in general, rather than specifically about Jewish Christians. Of course, the Galatian «agitators» would have come into the frame as well, but as a subset of a larger group: the dogs, the evil workers, the mutilation people. The first two of these epithets could have applied to pagans, of course, not least Cynics, as some have suggested, but the third, though clearly a pagan term, by generating the counter-assertion of verse 3, shows that it is Jews who are in mind. Yes, but Jews *seen now as a form of paganism*.

The shock which greets such an announcement in our contemporary world should be blunted by two compelling factors. First, this is by no means the only time where Paul makes exactly this move. In Galatians 4.1-11, in line with the letter as a whole, he warns the young church that if

they submit to circumcision they will not only not escape finally from the paganism they have rejected in becoming Christians, but will actually be returning to it in a subtler form. They will be returning to the realm of the flesh, of the principalities and powers. In Colossians 2, Paul warns the young church, not indeed against an actual syncretism or threatening new religion, but against Judaism *described in terms of paganism*.19 From Paul's Christian point of view, those Jews who do not embrace Jesus as their Messiah are thereby embracing instead an identity marked out by blood and soil, by ancestry and territory, in other words, by the «flesh». They are therefore subject to the same critique as paganism.

Nor, second, is this a Pauline invention. Before we pick up the stones of our post-enlightenment sensibilities to throw at Paul, or at any interpreter who dares to suggest that Paul might have done any such thing, we should recall that precisely this move was a standard way in which many Jewish groups in the second-Temple period would define themselves over against one another. We are the true Jews, say the Pharisees, say Qumran, say this or that revolutionary group; you are compromisers, *apikorsim*, no better than *goyim*. This is simply the other side of the coin of doing what Paul is manifestly doing, despite our desire that he should not, in verse 3, namely, defining Christians not even as «the true circumcision», but simply as the circumcision», *he peritome*, in contemptuous contrast to «the cut-off people», the «mutilation», *he katatome*. Paul is thus not only located on the map of second-Temple history, but, by employing an inner-Jewish rhetorical strategy in which one's opponents were cast as pseudo-pagans, he is able to use the device in a quite new way, setting up precisely this polemic so as to serve a new purpose, namely his anti-Caesar message.

Within this overall strategy, however, Paul is by no means saying, as some might too quickly conclude, that Judaism per se is bad, and to be rejected. This is where the model of 2.5-11 becomes so important. There the crucial point is that the Messiah did not regard his equality with God as something to be exploited: that is, he did indeed already possess equality with God, and did not abandon it, but interpreted it as committing him to the path of suffering and death, a decision which was then vindicated in his exaltation and lordship. [20] The fact that 3.7-11 is modelled on 2.5-11 suggests that we read Paul's autobiographical account as follows. Paul did not regard his covenant membership in Israel as something to be exploited. It did not entitle him, that is, to adopt a position of effortless superiority (or even, in pre-Sanders fashion, effort*full* superiority!) over the lesser breeds without the law. Nor, we should note, did he therefore regard covenant membership itself as unimportant, or to be jettisoned. He was not opposed to the idea of Judaism per se, nor indeed could he be; he was claiming the high ground that this was what Judaism had always been supposed to be: the historical people whose identity and destiny was now revealed in the crucified Messiah. Just as the Messiah had obeyed the covenant plan of God, and was now identified as the Lord of the world, so the Messiah's people were to find their covenant identity precisely «in» the Messiah, in his dying and rising, in his faithfulness, in the covenant membership which would be God's gift bestowed upon faithfulness. [21] Verses 10 and 11 sum up the train of thought: this, Paul is saying, is what it means to be the Israel of God, the circumcision. The fact that the crucified and risen Jesus is the Messiah has unveiled the truth about God's covenant plan for God's people.

Paul's warning, then, is not I believe against «agitators» as in Galatia, Jewish Christians who insisted on circumcision for pagan converts. It is a comparatively straightforward exposition of a

standard second-Temple Jewish position: God has redefined Israel through certain climactic and revelatory, in other words, apocalyptic, events, and all forms of Judaism that do not recognise this and conform are at best out of date and at worst dangerous compromises and parodies.

But this, as I have suggested, is not the central point of the chapter. The central point is now to argue: as I, Paul, have rethought my Jewish allegiance in the light of the crucified and risen Jesus, so you should rethink your Roman allegiance in the same light. The transitional passage, vv. 12-16, turns the self-description of vv. 4-11 into an example and exhortation, with the key transition coming in verses 15-16. Eschatology is indeed the key here, but not in the way it is sometimes imagined: just as Paul's covenant pilgrimage, his following of the Messiah through suffering and death to resurrection, is not yet complete, nor is the pilgrimage of the Philippians. This does of course rule out certain types of super-spirituality, but I see no need to postulate that this is Paul's primary concern, or even an important side-issue. The important point to get straight, before the final appeal of the chapter, in which, as in the eschaton itself, the veil is suddenly drawn aside, is that the Philippians, like Paul, must find their whole identity in the crucified and risen Messiah and nowhere else.

The final appeal, in verses 17-21, is then to be understood as follows. It is, to begin with, primarily a warning against sheer paganism. The fact that verses 18 and 19 can be read as a coded warning against some types of Judaism may well be deliberate, but I do not think it is the main thing which Paul is aiming at. [22] Rather, he is building up to saying: do not go along with the Caesar-cult that is currently sweeping the Eastern Mediterranean. You have one Lord and Saviour, and he will vindicate and glorify you, if you hold firm to him, just as the Father vindicated and glorified him after he had obeyed.

But the model of Paul's self-description in verses 2-11 does not allow us to treat this appeal as a simplistic rejection of everything to do with Caesar's empire. Paul is no dualist. Think for a moment of his regular ethical appeals: just because all things are new in Christ, that does not mean that Christians do not share with their non-Christian pagan neighbours a broad perception of things that are good and things that are evil (Romans 12). Just as it is wrong to suppose that *either* Paul was anti-Jewish *or* he had no critique of any other Jews, so it would be wrong to suppose that *either* he was opposed entirely to everything to do with the Roman empire *or* he was a quisling, a compromiser, going with the flow of the new establishment. As in Colossians 1, the Paul of Philippians would be quite prepared to say that the creator God has made all things in Christ, including the principalities and powers which then, having rebelled, need to be defeated and reconciled. Paul himself, if Acts is to be trusted, used his Roman citizenship to good advantage, not to set himself up as superior to non-citizens, nor yet, like Naaman the Syrian, to excuse a bit of paganism on the side, but as a way of getting to Rome to announce the revelation of God's justice in the Messiah, Jesus.

We might, then, treat his appeal as follows. God has, in Jesus, unveiled God's true kingdom, the true empire. It stands to all other empires, Caesar's included, somewhat as true covenant membership stands to that Judaism which remains opposed to the gospel message of the Messiah. The parallel may be uncomfortable for us at both ends, but we must follow it through; only so can the code, which is «safe» for the Philippians, have its full force. There is nothing specifically wrong with being a citizen of a country or of its wider extension, just as there is

nothing wrong with being Jewish. But when the gospel of Jesus is unveiled it reveals the true empire, the true citizenship, and in that light all the pretensions of empire, not least the arrogant and blasphemous claims of the emperor himself, are shown up, just as those who pride themselves on their circumcision are shown up as being «the mutilation». This is neither compromised nor dualistic-a position which Paul's interpreters have always found it hard to imitate. But the closing exhortation of the passage says it all: this is the way you are to stand firm in the Lord (4.1).

What then does Paul want his hearers to do? Renounce their citizenship? Presumably not; Paul did not renounce his. In any case, as sociological studies of Philippi have shown, by no means all the residents of the city and its surrounding area would have been Roman citizens. Many of the young church there would not have had that privilege. But the city as a whole prided itself on its colonial status, and even non-citizens might expect to derive benefit from such an intimate association with Rome, and hence with Caesar, the lord, the saviour, the great benefactor. Paul is warning them not to compromise their allegiance to Jesus, and to be prepared, by refusing to take part in cultic and other activities, to follow their Messiah along the path of suffering, knowing that Jesus, the one true Lord, was the Saviour who would rescue them and give them the only glory worth possessing. Verse 21 indicates clearly enough, partly by its close association with 2.10-11 and partly by its parallel with the fuller statement in1 Corinthians 15.23-28, that the time will come when Caesar and all who follow and worship him will be humbled before the throne of the true Lord of the World.

One final point about Philippians 3. If verses 2-11 are intended to function, as I have argued, as a coded challenge to Caesar's empire, telling Paul's story of renouncing his past, and embracing the Messiah, in order to encourage the Philippians down a similar path, they also function sequentially within the consecutive logic of the chapter. It is precisely because they are assured they are indeed the people of the one true God, formed in the Messiah through his death and resurrection, that the Philippians will have the courage and confidence to trust him as saviour and lord and so to renounce the imperial claims of Caesar. And in doing so they will find the warnings of Paul resonating at various levels. If he can renounce his unrivalled privileges, so can they.

Five Concluding Reflections

First, Paul's critique of Caesar's empire was firmly grounded in his Jewish heritage. Discovering the pagan history-of-religions parallels to Paul does not mean suggesting that Paul did not remain a thoroughly Jewish thinker. What he does with the Caesar-cult stems directly from what Isaiah does with the Babylonian cult, which in turn looks back to Deuteronomy's rejection of all paganism in favour of the stern monotheism of the creator and covenant god. The rediscovery in our day of the pagan context and target of Paul's thinking should not mean for one minute a going back on the great gain of the last generation, the rediscovery that Paul was and remained a thoroughly Jewish thinker.

Second, the Jewish thinking that formed the centre and driving force of his rejection of Caesar's empire was expressed in Paul's very high Christology. Philippians 3.20f. is based firmly on 2.5-11, which poetically articulates a view of Jesus which claims for him nothing less than equality

with, and identity with, the one God of Jewish monotheism. In this passage and several others, Paul marks the beginning of the process that led to what we know as trinitarian theology, which insists on Jewish-style monotheism against pagan polytheism but insists on a threefoldness within this one God. There has been a fashion in some circles for regarding later trinitarianism as one sign of the process whereby, so it is said, the church climbed down from its earlier political confrontation with the empire and arrived at a compromise, an accommodation. Whatever the truth of that, it is important to realise that, in Paul, opposition to Caesar and adherence to a very high, very Jewish Christology were part of the same thing. Jesus was Lord—*Kyrios*, with all its Septuagintal overtones—and Caesar was not.

Third, neither the recognition that Paul's main target was paganism, and the Caesar-cult in particular, nor the equal recognition that he remained a throughly Jewish thinker, should blind us for a moment to the fact that Paul still expressed a thorough critique of non-messianic Judaism. Paul remains at this point on the map of second-temple Judaism: believing that God had acted to remodel the covenant people necessarily entailed believing that those who refused to join this remodelled people were missing out on God's eschatological purpose. As post-holocaust thinkers we will of course be careful how we say all this. As historians of the first century, we will recognise that it must be said. As Pauline theologians we will recognise that it contains no shadow, no hint, of anything that can be called anti-Judaism, still less anti-semitism.

Fourth, the argument I have mounted indicates clearly enough that whatever Paul was heralding as he went around the Mediterranean world, our post-enlightenment category of «religion» is far too restricted to handle it. Since that category was designed to exclude politics, among other things, and since Paul's proclamation clearly carried a political message at its heart, not merely as one «implication» among many, we should refuse to allow the study of Paul to be confined within what is normally thought of as the history of religion. This has large-scale implications for the organisation of our disciplines. Perhaps Paul should be taught just as much in the politics departments of our universities as in the religion departments.

Fifth, and in conclusion: if Paul's answer to Caesar's empire is the empire of Jesus, what does that say about this new empire, living under the rule of its new lord? It implies a high and strong ecclesiology, in which the scattered and often muddled cells of women, men and children loyal to Jesus as Lord form colonial outposts of the empire that is to be: subversive little groups when seen from Caesar's point of view, but when seen Jewishly an advance foretaste of the time when the earth shall be filled with the glory of the God of Abraham and the nations will join Israel in singing God's praises. From this point of view, therefore, this counter-empire can never be merely critical, never merely subversive. It claims to be the reality of which Caesar's empire is the parody; it claims to be modelling the genuine humanness, not least the justice and peace, and the unity across traditional racial and cultural barriers, of which Caesar's empire boasted. If this claim is not to collapse once more into dualism, into a rejection of every human aspiration and value, it will be apparent that there will be a large degree of overlap. «Shun what is evil; cling to what is good.» There will be affirmation as well as critique, collaboration as well as critique. To collaborate without compromise, to criticise without dualism—this is the delicate path that Jesus' counter-empire had to learn to tread. On the day I sat down to draft this paper, an editorial came to my eye which nicely summed up the first of these: what is desired is «a model for churches and theologians to contribute to the ordering of society, without being Christianly imperialistic».

[23] Equally, we need a model for churches and theologians to contribute to the critique of society, without being Christianly dualistic. Paul points the way to this finely balanced agenda, and we who live with the legacy of two thousand years of the church getting it sometimes right and often wrong would do well to return to our roots to learn fresh wisdom.

Notes for Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire

1. See, recently, James D. G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle (Eerdmans, 1998); the four volumes of Pauline Theology emerging from the Pauline Theology Seminar at the SBL; and, among my own works, N. T. Wright, The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology (T & T Clark/ Fortress, 1991).
2. Richard A. Horsley, ed., Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society (Trinity Press International, 1997). One of the other recent books in this area on which Horsley draws for two of his chapters is Neil Elliott, Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle (Orbis, 1994).
3. Cf. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle, 674-680. The index to Dunn's books does not mention Caesar, empire, imperial cult, politics, power(s), or state. This highlights the danger of treating a specific text (in this case Romans) as a template for one's systematic treatment-though, as we shall see, the main sections of Romans might perhaps have suggested a very different ordering of the subject.
4. N. T. Wright, «Gospel and Theology in Galatians,» in Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker, eds. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson (Sheffield Academic Press, 1994). 222-239; What St Paul Really Said (Forward Movement Publications, 1997), ch. 3.
5. Even those who in other respects have challenged similar history-of-religions arguments often seem happy to let this one stand: e.g. Martin Hengel, The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion, trans. John Bowden (Fortress Press, 1976); idem, Studies in Early Christology (T & T Clark, 1995).
6. Climax of the Covenant, chs. 2, 3. It should perhaps be noted that, for Paul as for the rest of second-Temple Judaism, «Messiah» carries no connotations of «divinity».
7. Looking back to Ex. 23.31, and to such «fulfilments» as 1 Kgs. 4.21-4; and across to other passages such as Ps. 80.11; 89.25-7; Zech. 9.10.
8. A further theme which could have been tackled here, if space had allowed, is that of the «parousia», which, as Koester points out (Paul and Politics, 158f.), is itself replete with imperial/political overtones.
9. E.g. Rom. 10.13, quoting Joel 3.5 LXX.
10. Phil. 2.10, alluding to Isa. 45.23. On the passage see Climax of the Covenant, ch. 4 and below.
11. See N. T. Wright, «On Becoming the Righteousness of God: 2 Corinthians 5:21,» in Pauline Theology Volume II: 1 & 2 Corinthians, ed. David M. Hay (Fortress, 1993), 200-208; What St Paul Really Said, ch. 6; «Romans and the Theology of Paul,» in Society of Biblical Literature 1992 Seminar Papers, ed. Eugene H. Lovering (Scholars Press, 1992), 184-213.
12. I have explored this theme in various places, e.g. Climax of the Covenant, 21-6; N. T. Wright, The New Testament and the People of God, vol. 1 of Christian Origins and the Question of God (SPCK/Fortress, 1992), ch. 9.
13. Ps. 67.4; 82.8; etc.
14. This point, though it was developed independently, has close analogies with the argument of Elliott, Liberating Paul, 190-2. See too Dieter Georgi, Theocracy in Paul's Praxis and Theology (Fortress, 1991), ch. 4, excerpted in Horsely, Paul and Empire, 148-57. Georgi seems to me to underplay the point about Iustitia in favour of other points equally worth further exploration, about fides/pistis, etc. Perhaps his translation of dikaiosyne as «solidarity», and the rejection of its meaning of «justice» within the Jewish Bible as relevant to Paul, has led him to overlook the point. I agree with him (Georgi, Theocracy, 85) that Paul's dikaiosyne has its roots in the Jewish

Bible, but one of my main themes here is that there is no need to refuse a concept a Greco-Roman setting or target just because its history-of-religions origin is Jewish.

15. On Iustitia, the Roman equivalent of DIKE, see e.g. Ovid Epistulae ex Ponto 3.6.25; the Acts of Augustus ch. 34; and OCD, sv.
16. On Romans 13 see Elliott, Liberating Paul, 214-26 (in Horsely, Paul and Empire, ch. 11).
17. Cf. Horsely, Paul and Empire, 141: «The Philippians would hardly have been unaware that since the battle of Actium they already had a savior who was their lord . . . .»
18. Cf. Elliott, Liberating Paul, 197; cp. Georgi, Theocracy, 72-8; Horsely, in Paul and Empire, 140f.
19. I do not share the opinion that this is post-Pauline, and indeed the attempts within the new reading of Paul to suggest that Colossians and Ephesians represent a softening of Paul's opposition to Caesar strike me as absurd. See N. T. Wright, The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon, TNTC, new series (Inter-varsity Press/Eerdmans, 1986); J. D. G. Dunn, The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Eerdmans, 1996).
20. Cf. Climax of the Covenant, ch. 4.
21. Nb. the very close parallel to this in Gal. 2.19-21.
22. Even if «belly» and «shame» were to be read as euphemisms (so C. L. Mearns, «The Identity of Paul's Opponents at Philippi,» New Testament Studies 33 (1987): 194-204), the natural primary referent would be the phallic symbolism of some pagan cults.
23. W. M. Jacob, in Theology 101, no. 804 (1998), 402.

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