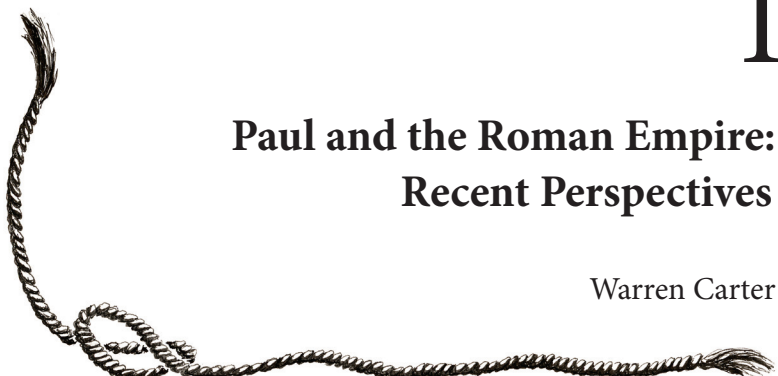


## Paul and the Roman Empire: Recent Perspectives

Warren Carter



**F**or a growing number of scholars, Paul's primary engagement was not with other Jesus followers nor with first-century Judaism but with the Roman Empire. How did Paul evaluate the empire? What guidance did he offer Jesus followers for negotiating it in their daily living? What similarities or differences exist between the structures of Paul's theological thinking and ecclesial communities and imperial perspectives and structures? In this chapter I will look at several significant contributions to this developing perspective on Paul, some critiques of it, and challenges for future work. Because of space limitations, the discussion and bibliography can be only illustrative, not comprehensive.

### THE SBL PAUL AND POLITICS GROUP

Significant impetus for this work has come from three books edited by Richard Horsley, published between 1997<sup>1</sup> and 2004.<sup>2</sup> The three volumes contain the work of scholars associated with the Society of Biblical Literature's Paul and Politics group, of which Horsley was at the time co-chair with Cynthia Kittredge. The books, comprising some seven hundred pages and thirty-six chapters, along with various introductory pieces and responses, represent the work of about thirty scholars. Some of these scholars have written other articles and books related to Paul's

---

<sup>1</sup>Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997).

<sup>2</sup>Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000); idem, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2004).

engagement with the Roman Empire.<sup>3</sup> Collectively, the volumes offer a significant challenge to much previous and current work on Paul and advocate an innovative and exciting approach that cannot be ignored in studies of Paul.

### *Aims and Agenda*

In his introductory essay to *Paul and Empire* (1997), Horsley justifies the investigation of Paul's interaction with the Roman Empire by observing that before it became the empire's established religion, "Christianity was a product of empire."<sup>4</sup> This imperial origin, though, has been obscured from scholarly investigation by the late eighteenth century's separation of church and state so that biblical and theological studies concentrated on religious or spiritual matters and ignored political and economic dimensions and imperial contexts. Horsley locates the rediscovery of the imperial world in which Paul conducts his mission in relation to similar rediscoveries of empire in other disciplines (literary studies; HB), the emergence of postcolonial criticism, the influence of non-European-American scholars, and some historical Jesus work.

Horsley elaborates the agenda in his introduction to *Paul and Politics* (2000), a volume dedicated to Krister Stendahl for his pioneering work in "bringing greater sensitivity to concrete human relations" and thereby preparing for this work in Pauline studies.<sup>5</sup> In Stendahl's significant essay, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,"<sup>6</sup> Horsley finds five arguments that challenged the predominantly theological and individualized interpretation of Paul:

- the Protestant focus on individual sin, salvation, and justification by faith missed Paul's concern with including Gentiles in the messianic community;
- the anti-Jewish bias in constructions of Paul as struggling to throw off law-bound first-century Judaism ignored salvation history and Paul's vision of Israel's salvation;

---

<sup>3</sup>The notes in these three volumes often signal further work.

<sup>4</sup>Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 1–8.

<sup>5</sup>Horsley, "Introduction: Krister Stendahl's Challenge to Pauline Studies," *Paul and Politics*, 1–17, esp. 5–10; see also Elliott, "Paul and the Politics of Empire: Problems and Prospects," 17–39.

<sup>6</sup>Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *HTR* 56 (1963): 199–215.

- the emphasis on generalized theological issues ignored the contingent, specific, and historical, address of Paul's letters;
- the concern with theology overlooked Paul's focus on social/human relations to which theology has secondary significance;
- subsequent interpretations of Paul, especially through the lens of the socially conservative deuteropaulines, must be challenged by the original contexts of Paul's letters.

Stendahl's work opened the way for questioning conventional approaches to Paul. Participants in social movements for liberation, such as African-American, feminist, non-European and/or two-thirds world, Jewish, and dis-eased Western male interpreters, shared a common concern with the diverse and interrelated forms of domination such as race, gender, ethnicity, and social status. They examined, for instance, Paul's treatment of slavery and women and exposed the use of Paul by colonizing Western missionaries to enforce submission and by Christian scholars to perpetuate anti-Judaism.<sup>7</sup> The SBL Paul and Politics group emerged to investigate four interrelated areas: Paul and the politics of the churches; Paul and the politics of Israel; Paul and the politics of the Roman Empire; and Paul and the politics of interpretation.

Informed by the analyses of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Fernando Segovia,<sup>8</sup> Horsley sketches further implications of "how problematic Western privatized and depoliticized interpretations of biblical texts have become."<sup>9</sup> He points especially to the imperialistic nature of scholarly inquiry that assumed and asserted European/American elite male interests to be universal and that silenced the interests, experiences, identities, and voices of all others; the silence of biblical scholars on major socio-political issues of the last fifty years; the inability of the New Perspective on Paul to move outside the traditional opposition of Paul to Judaism; and the continuing neglect of imperial and power dynamics in various other new methods developed in recent decades (social-scientific; postmodernist; cultural studies). He outlines four principles that guide the formulation of political interpretations of Paul:

---

<sup>7</sup>Horsley, "Introduction," *Paul and Politics*, 10–15.

<sup>8</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); Fernando Segovia, "And They Began to Speak in Other Tongues: Competing Forms of Discourse in Contemporary Biblical Discourse," in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (ed. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 1–32.

<sup>9</sup>Horsley, "Introduction," *Paul and Politics*, 11.

- Texts and interpretations are sites of struggle among various voices.
- The production and interpretation of texts do not involve only ideas but also power relations, interests, values, and visions; all interpretation has an agenda.
- Both texts and interpreters occupy particular social locations and contexts requiring systemic analysis of wider political-economic-religious structures and power relations as well as of local assemblies. There is a special interest in “readings from below,” in the marginalized and oppressed with demystification and liberation in mind.
- Interpreters’ identity and social location are hybrid and complex, embracing multiple positions and perspectives involving various interrelationships of class, gender, race, and ethnicity.

Horsley summarizes the approach by saying: “The aims and agenda of the Paul and Politics group are, broadly, to problematize, interrogate, and re-vision Pauline texts and interpretations, to identify oppressive formulations as well as potentially liberative visions and values in order to recover their unfulfilled historical possibilities, all in critical mutual engagement among diverse participants.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Content and Areas of Investigation*

In order to pursue this agenda, scholars must study not only Paul but also the work of classical scholars on the structures, ideology, and practices of the Roman Empire. Thus Horsley’s *Paul and Empire* (1997) begins with essays examining aspects of the Roman world with five essays being written by classical scholars. Part 1, comprising four essays by Peter Brunt, Dieter Georgi, Simon Price, and Paul Zanker, is entitled “The Gospel of Imperial Salvation.” It focuses on the cluster of propaganda claims, practices, and institutions that sustains and creates the Roman imperial world, especially the imperial cult. The four articles describe what Horsley calls in the section introduction “the gospel of Imperial Salvation,” the gospel of Caesar, the imperial savior, who had established “peace and security” in the cities of Paul’s mission where urban elites had willingly “established shrines, temples, citywide festivals and intercity games to honor their savior.”<sup>11</sup> The imperial cult pervaded public life, a political-religious form of power that served both rulers (the allied elite) and the ruled in estab-

---

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>11</sup>Horsley, “General Introduction,” *Paul and Empire*, 3–4.

lishing and recognizing divine sanction for the prevailing order. Religion is thus not separate from or independent of the imperial order. It participates in and sanctions the political order and societal power relations. To create an alternative to this order of power, as Paul did, is to engage in a politically charged act.<sup>12</sup>

The second section, comprising three essays by Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, John Chow, and Richard Gordon, is headed “Patronage, Priesthoods, and Power.” This section also investigates the power relations that “held the far-flung empire of Rome together,” by exploring the religio-political (Gordon) and socio-economic networks of patronage that secured the self-serving power of emperors and allied Roman and provincial elites (Garnsey and Saller, Chow) who strategically controlled the dependent lower orders, undermined bonds of solidarity among the urban poor and peasantry, and limited their access to goods and other benefits. That is, patronage, fusing the “emperor cult with the social-economic system of patronage,” was a means of both social cohesion and social control.<sup>13</sup>

The second half of the book interprets Paul in relation to this Roman imperial context. In part 3, entitled “Paul’s Counter-Imperial Gospel,” Dieter Georgi discusses Paul’s vocabulary in Romans (*euangelion*, *pistis*, *dikaiosynē*, *eirēnē*) that echoes Roman political theology and frames Paul’s gospel as a “competitor of the gospel of Caesar” (ch. 8). Helmut Koester delineates Paul’s evocation of and opposition to the Roman imperial boast of having established “peace and security” (1 Thess 5:3; ch. 9). Neil Elliott (ch. 10) argues that the crucified Christ is the center of Paul’s anti-imperial gospel, that this crucified political insurrectionary has been enthroned as Lord and his parousia (another imperial term) is awaited. Elliott argues that Paul understands “the rulers” who crucify Jesus in 1 Cor 2:8 in the context of Jewish apocalyptic traditions as evil rulers who dominate the current order and who are “being destroyed” (1 Cor 2:6) and subjected to God’s justice.<sup>14</sup> What then of Paul’s command to “be subject to the governing authorities” in Rom 13:1–7? In chapter 11, Elliott argues that Romans addresses Gentile-Christian boasting or claims of supercessionism in a context of Jewish vulnerability to imperial violence involving agitation

---

<sup>12</sup>Horsley, “The Gospel of Imperial Salvation: Introduction,” *Paul and Empire*, 10–24.

<sup>13</sup>Horsley, “Patronage, Priesthoods, and Power: Introduction,” *Paul and Empire*, 88–95, esp. 95.

<sup>14</sup>Horsley (“Paul’s Counter-Imperial Gospel: Introduction,” *Paul and Empire*, 140–47) devotes much of his introduction to arguing that “Paul has in mind the concrete political rulers and authorities” (142) and that apocalyptic traditions are very much concerned with historical, political struggles (often ignored by recent approaches to Paul’s “social context”).

over taxes. The command for submission offers Roman Christians a temporary strategy of judicious restraint appropriate to a historical context of Jewish vulnerability and parallel to that offered in similar circumstances by Philo and Josephus.

The final section, entitled “Building an Alternative Society,” focuses on ecclesial practices and structures. Horsley argues that Paul cannot be understood as converting from one religion to another or as founding a new religion.<sup>15</sup> Rather, Paul’s Pharisaic roots connect him to movements that sought Israel’s independence from Hellenistic and Roman imperial traditions. Horsley identifies Paul’s communities or *ekklesia* as “comprehensive in their common purpose, exclusive over against the dominant society, and part of an intercity, international movement.”<sup>16</sup> Paul understands the *ekklesia* (“a political term with certain religious overtones”) not as cultic communities but “as the political assembly of the people ‘in Christ’ in pointed juxtaposition and ‘competition’ with the official city assembly” (also identified as *ekklesia*).<sup>17</sup> Forming a social alternative to *Pax Romana* and rooted in Israel’s traditions, these communities (not Rome) fulfill the divine promise to Abraham to bless all the nations and enact patterns of more egalitarian socio-economic interactions that differ from hierarchical patronage systems.

Karl Donfried elaborates this interaction of an alternative society over against the Roman imperial order in his analysis of “The Imperial Cults of Thessalonica and Political Conflict in 1 Thessalonians.”<sup>18</sup> Donfried locates the hostility and opposition to Paul’s mission, gospel, and community (Acts 17:1–9) in the context of a challenge to the city’s prominent imperial cult and order, rejecting claims that Paul wanted acceptance and integration.

Schüssler Fiorenza, in contrast to those who deny any political implications for the baptismal formula of Gal 3:28 (“no longer Jew or Greek . . . slave or free . . . male or female”), argues that the formula functions as “a communal Christian self-definition,” shaping the social interrelationships and structures of the community marked by freedom.<sup>19</sup> Paul envisaged a surpassing of the central divisions in imperial society of ethnicity, societal status, and gender. “All distinctions of religion, race, class, nationality, and gender are insignificant,” creating an alternative, more egalitarian community inclusive of slaves and women that denied

---

<sup>15</sup>Horsley, “Introduction,” *Paul and Empire*, 206–14.

<sup>16</sup>Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 208.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 208–9.

<sup>18</sup>Donfried in Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 215–23.

<sup>19</sup>Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Praxis of Coequal Discipleship,” in Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 224–41.

cultural-religious male privileges and created tension with the larger, hierarchical Roman world.<sup>20</sup>

In the final chapter, Horsley pursues similar emphases on the formation and practices of an alternative society in “1 Corinthians: A Case Study of Paul’s Assembly as an Alternative Society.”<sup>21</sup> Paul’s discussions of the crucified Christ (1 Cor 1:17–2:8) and the resurrection (1 Cor 15) frame God’s definitive present and future intervention that ensures the destruction of the imperial “rulers of this age” as enemies of God’s purposes (1 Cor 2:6–8; 15:24–28). The remaining discussion discloses the structure of both Paul’s mission and the network of household-based assembly/ies called by Paul to “conduct (their) own affairs autonomously, in complete independence of ‘the world’” (1 Cor 5–6) though with continuing mission in it. The prohibition on eating food offered to idols removes the Corinthian assemblies from fundamental societal interactions, thereby ensuring the groups’ survival “as an exclusive alternative community to the dominant society” and its social and power networks (1 Cor 8–10).<sup>22</sup> Paul also exhorts different economic relations. His refusal of their support exemplifies “horizontal economic reciprocity” (1 Cor 9) that differed from hierarchical imperial patronage relations of benefit to the elite. And the collection of 1 Cor 16:1–4 indicates economic solidarity, horizontal reciprocity, and an “international political-economic dimension diametrically opposed to the tributary political economy of the empire.”<sup>23</sup>

Further exploration of the Corinthian correspondence and communities is evident in other articles in *Paul and Politics* (2000). In “Rhetoric and Empire—and 1 Corinthians,” Horsley identifies the conflictual communication between Paul and the assembly as comprising two competing discourses, both of which oppose the Roman imperial order, and locates them in the system of power relations constituted by elite political rhetoric (embedded in provincial alliances, advocacy of the imperial cult, and patronage) that sustained imperial and civic order, exerted control, and secured consent and harmony. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, however, is not

---

<sup>20</sup>Schüssler Fiorenza (ibid., 224–41) also discusses 1 Cor 7 and the household code of Col 3 that “takes over the Greco-Roman ethic of the patriarchal household” (237). She omits any discussion of another form of the household code from about the same time as Colossians in Matt 19–20 that imitates, critiques, and provides an alternative to the dominant Greco-Roman form by insisting on mutuality and more egalitarian structures. See Warren Carter, *Households and Discipleship*, and *Matthew and the Margins* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000), 376–410.

<sup>21</sup>Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 242–52.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 248.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 251.

convinced of Paul's unqualified opposition to the empire.<sup>24</sup> She discusses gender relations and other voices such as the women prophets in order to reconstruct and evaluate the various self-understandings and political interactions within the Corinthian community. She argues that "Paul uses imperial language to both subvert and reinscribe the imperial system,"<sup>25</sup> imitating its patronage, as well as its hierarchical and subordinating political and gender relations. Sheila Briggs notes ambiguities and contradictions in discourse about slavery in the Roman world and argues that Paul's rhetoric, originating from a free-born Christian who shared with others anxiety about upwardly mobile slaves and about being accused of upsetting the social order, is similarly marked (1 Cor 7:24).<sup>26</sup> Sze-kar Wan argues that the collection for the poor in Jerusalem "lay at the heart of Paul's concern with redefining Jewish group boundaries to include gentile converts" (1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9).<sup>27</sup> Paul's metanarrative of eschatological and cosmic universalism inclusive of Jew and Gentile critiques both Jewish and Roman imperialism, including, with an emphasis on equity/mutual indebtedness, the divine origin of prosperity and the imperial structure of patronage. Allen Callahan identifies 1 Corinthians as "an emancipatory project"<sup>28</sup> in which Paul offers ecclesial manumission (1 Cor 7, the community buys freedom for enslaved believers), mutuality (communal interdependence in justice [1 Cor 6:1-9]) and economics (1 Cor 16:1-4), as three communal practices to sustain emancipation among this community comprising those without privilege, prestige, and power, against Roman hegemony.

Other chapters investigate aspects of Paul's interactions with other communities, especially matters concerning Israel. Pamela Eisenbaum, for example, focuses on Paul's Abrahamic identity establishing "a new kind of family . . . made up of Jews and Gentiles."<sup>29</sup> Mark Nanos rejects conventional readings of Galatians that emphasize the struggle as "Christianity versus Judaism" or (in more recent interpretations) as an intra-Christian struggle but styles it as an intra- and inter-Jewish debate concerned with how Gentiles

---

<sup>24</sup>Kittredge, "Corinthian Women Prophets and Paul's Argumentation in 1 Corinthians," in Horsley, *Paul and Politics*, 103-9, drawing on the work of Antoinette Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

<sup>25</sup>Kittredge, "Corinthian Women Prophets," 105.

<sup>26</sup>Briggs, "Paul on Bondage and Freedom in Imperial Roman Society," in Horsley, *Paul and Politics*, 110-23.

<sup>27</sup>Wan, "Collection for the Saints as Anticolonial Act: Implications of Paul's Ethnic Reconstruction," in Horsley, *Paul and Politics*, 191-215, esp. 192.

<sup>28</sup>Callahan, "Paul, Ekklesia, and Emancipation in Corinth: A Coda on Liberation Theology," in Horsley, *Paul and Politics*, 216-23, esp. 216-18.

<sup>29</sup>Eisenbaum, "Paul as the New Abraham," in Horsley, *Paul and Politics*, 130-45, esp.132.



are to be incorporated into the people of God.<sup>30</sup> Alan Segal highlights Paul's inclusive focus on "Jews and Gentiles making one community."<sup>31</sup>

N. T. Wright locates his discussion of "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire" in affirmations that religion and politics are inseparable and that Paul's gospel challenges imperial cult and ideology.<sup>32</sup> Under the heading "Jesus Christ Is Lord: Exegetical Studies in Paul's Counterimperial Gospel," Wright examines four points of collision between Paul's theological claims and Roman imperial theology in which Paul asserts an alternative sovereignty and loyalty: (1) the term "gospel" evokes Isaiah's hope for establishing God's reign and Jesus as "Israel's Messiah and the world's Lord"; (2) Jesus' identity as messianic "King and Lord"; (3) the revelation of God's covenant faithfulness as justice or putting right of the world that challenges in Romans the Roman goddess and claim to provide Iustitia; (4) "Paul's Coded Challenge to Empire" in a discussion of Phil 3. Wright concludes by noting that Paul's critique of empire is grounded in his Jewish heritage, that his high Christology is central to it, that this critique is maintained along with a critique of nonmessianic Judaism, that Paul's challenge cannot be confined to and by the category of "religion," and that ecclesiology, critique, and collaboration are integral to it.

The third volume, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*,<sup>33</sup> contains seven chapters along with Horsley's introduction that summarizes central emphases in this approach<sup>34</sup> and a response from classical scholar Simon Price. Robert Jewett reads Rom 8:18–23 in the context of and as disputing Roman imperial claims about the renewal of nature.<sup>35</sup> Focusing on 1 Thess

<sup>30</sup>Nanos, "The Inter- and Intra-Jewish Political Context of Paul's Letter to the Galatians," in Horsley, *Paul and Politics*, 146–59.

<sup>31</sup>Segal, "Response: Some Aspects of Conversion and Identity Formation," in Horsley, *Paul and Politics*, 184–90, esp. 188.

<sup>32</sup>Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in Horsley, *Paul and Politics*, 160–79.

<sup>33</sup>Horsley, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*.

<sup>34</sup>Horsley (ibid., 1–23) discusses the conventional setting of Paul in opposition to Judaism; a spiritualized reading in which Paul is supposedly interested only in religion separated from political-economic matters; the discovery of a Jewish Paul (covenantal nomism) in mission to Gentiles (Stendahl); the discovery of the Roman imperial world as not only Paul's context but also as the order to which Paul is opposed and with which his communities of alternative identity and practices encounter conflict; features of the Roman imperial order, its impact, and its various means of maintaining control (displacement of subject peoples, slavery, patronage, imperial cult, rhetoric), as well as various means of negotiating and opposing its power.

<sup>35</sup>Jewett, "The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Reading Romans 8:18–23 in the Imperial Context," in Horsley, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, 25–46.

2:14–16, Abraham Smith contextualizes Paul's mission and communities in continuing conflicts among subject peoples.<sup>36</sup> Neil Elliott examines Paul's use of imagery from the imperial triumph to present his own anti-imperial mission.<sup>37</sup> Rollin Ramsaran investigates Paul's contestive rhetoric in 1 Corinthians.<sup>38</sup> Efrain Agosto compares elite letters of recommendation with Paul's commendatory letters to argue that Paul calls leaders to sacrificial service (not domination) in oppositional communities.<sup>39</sup> Erik Heen rereads Phil 2:6–11 as rejecting the elite quest for honors while God raises and exalts the crucified Jesus as a counter-emperor.<sup>40</sup> Jennifer Wright Knust argues that in attacking vice and immorality Paul rejects imperial claims to have restored public morality, but in advocating Christ as the master over sin, Paul reinscribes hierarchical, imperial assumptions about sex, gender, and status.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the three volumes various "response" articles engage the contributions and foster further debate by affirming, restating, and contesting interpretations. Antoinette Wire, for example, affirms interest in Paul's rhetoric in the essays of Horsley, Kittredge, and Briggs,<sup>42</sup> criticizes Horsley for ignoring the rhetoric of others in the Corinthian assembly who might be more anti-imperial than Paul, commends Kittredge for attending to Paul's imitation of, rather than exclusive resistance to, the empire and its patronage, and agrees with Briggs's analysis that Paul's gospel might have had little social value for most slaves. Wire and Calvin Roetzel affirm Wan's attention to ethnicity and matters of power but question how the collection might subvert Roman hegemony except in the sense that Jewish hopes conflict with Roman imperialism.<sup>43</sup> Wire also wonders,

---

<sup>36</sup>Smith, "Unmasking the Powers: A Postcolonial Analysis of 1 Thessalonians," in Horsley, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, 47–66.

<sup>37</sup>Elliott, "The Apostle Paul's Self-Presentation as Anti-Imperial Performance," in Horsley, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, 67–88.

<sup>38</sup>Ramsaran, "Resisting Imperial Domination and Influence: Paul's Apocalyptic Rhetoric in 1 Corinthians," in Horsley, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, 89–102.

<sup>39</sup>Agosto, "Patronage and Commendation, Imperial and Anti-Imperial," in Horsley, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, 103–24.

<sup>40</sup>Heen, "Phil 2:6–11 and Resistance to Local Timocratic Rule: *Isa Theō* and the Cult of the Emperor in the East," in Horsley, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, 125–54.

<sup>41</sup>Knust, "Paul and the Politics of Virtue and Vice," in Horsley, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, 155–74.

<sup>42</sup>Wire, "Response: The Politics of the Assembly in Corinth," in Horsley, *Paul and Politics*, 124–29.

<sup>43</sup>Wire, "Response: Paul and Those Outside Power," and Calvin Roetzel, "How Anti-Imperial Was the Collection and How Emancipatory Was Paul's Project?" in Horsley, *Paul and Politics*, 224–30.

in response to Callahan, how Corinthians can be liberative when Paul wants slaves to remain in slavery (1 Cor 7:24; also Roetzl), women to remarry immoral husbands, and women to cover their heads and be silent in worship. Roetzl also doubts that Paul was as committed to mutualism as Callahan asserts, given Paul's sometimes threatening assertion of his apostolic authority.

The classical scholar Simon Price, whose work on the imperial cult has been significant for the "Paul and Empire" discussion, takes up two larger issues.<sup>44</sup> He argues that Rome itself cannot be assumed to be Paul's context, but the Roman Empire as it was encountered and negotiated in and by (Eastern) provincial cities and their local, elite-centered, structures of power. Second, concerning Paul's subversiveness, Price argues that while this is hard to assess because of limited (classical) scholarly interest, Paul "has 'political' points to make" that embrace also "local social and religious values."<sup>45</sup>

Price's cautions about the important distinction between Rome and Eastern cities are well taken. But his examples demonstrate that the distinction cannot be pressed too far. The provincial assembly of Asia, and Philo in mid first-century Alexandria, are demonstrably well familiar with aspects of Augustan court ideology. That Paul and his hearers in Rome or in provincial centers would be familiar with such imperial claims (comparable forms of which had existed in Hellenistic imperial claims) is not unlikely.

Price is also correct to note the general lack of classical scholarly attention to dissident and subversive voices in the empire. Its politics of interpretation has generally focused on elite interests and sources, a generally positive evaluation of Rome's empire, attention to its "successes and consent," as Price notes, and a neglect of social-scientific models of empire, resulting in relatively little attention to the diverse modes of dissent.<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, in cataloguing "subversive" activity in the empire (bandits; local rebel leaders; cultic activity), Price generally though not exclusively seems to equate "subversion" with violent, public attacks on imperial

---

<sup>44</sup>Price, "Response," in Horsley, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, 175–83.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>46</sup>Ironically Price ("Response," 176–77 n. 4) urges biblical scholars to consult volumes 10 and 11 of the *Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 2000) as "primary points of reference" suggesting that "Biblical scholars seem hesitant to use them and instead cite less authoritative sources." While the Cambridge volumes are an invaluable resource, it is also true that they pay relatively little attention to modes of resistance and perspectives of non-elites. And the notes in these three Paul volumes hardly evidence a preference for "less authoritative sources."

interests. But James C. Scott's work on expressions of protest and dissent in peasant societies has demonstrated oppressed peasant/artisan groups rarely challenge public transcripts and their big traditions directly but prefer self-protective, calculated, strategic actions that indirectly contest public transcripts, while also maintaining little traditions that enhance dignity and envisage and sustain alternative communities and practices.<sup>47</sup> It is among such co-opted yet contestive, confrontational yet accommodated dynamics that we should locate Paul's "political" activity, practices, communities, and visions (as well as find comparable models).

## EVALUATION

There is no doubt that these volumes presenting the work of the Paul and Politics group present a major rethinking of Paul and a reading of his letters that is both an alternative and challenge to existing work. It might be helpful to identify some significant features of this work.

This work has shown Paul's engagement with three overlapping and comprehensive societal structures and cultural traditions, namely, the assemblies of Christ believers, Israel, and the Roman Empire. It has also engaged a fourth tradition, the extensive legacy of debate and interpretation concerning Paul. To engage such areas is to wrestle with central Pauline material. To protest that the areas are not specifically theological (Christology, soteriology, eschatology) is to maintain an artificial separation of religion and politics and to miss the point that such matters cannot be isolated from the societal structures and cultural traditions of Paul's worlds.

This rereading of Paul is necessarily interdisciplinary since the worlds that Paul inhabits and constitutes are multivalent and complex. It draws on recent work on the diversity and complexity of first-century Judaism and on classical studies. Methodologically and in terms of personnel, the work draws together African-American, feminist, non-European, and postcolonialist scholars and scholarship. Matters of power, domination, liberation, emancipation, ethnicity, gender, social status, community formation, boundaries, exclusion/inclusion, and imperialism are inevitably to the fore.

Attention to the Roman imperial world has exposed the limits and contributions of Eurocentric male scholarship, of the exclusively Jewish horizon of the New Perspective, and the cultural but not political-imperial focus of "social world" work. Especially significant is the reframing and

---

<sup>47</sup>James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

promotion of the Roman imperial world from background and context to the central entity that Paul and his communities actively negotiate, imitate, and contest.

The extensive agenda and rich interdisciplinary approaches are reflected in the wide range of Pauline topics and texts engaged in the essays discussed above. Some aspects of all seven undisputed letters are discussed. Imperial negotiation, community formation, women, slavery, freedom, imperial cults, eschatology, soteriology, rhetoric, Jewish traditions (apocalyptic; Abrahamic; Gentile inclusion), Christology, and the collection for the Jerusalem church are among the prominent general categories engaged in this significant rethinking of Paul. The extensive subject matter illustrates that this inquiry is not concerned with issues peripheral to the reading of Paul.

Evident in the contributions and responses is the active debate among contributors. One debated issue concerns how to style Paul's negotiation of the Roman world. For some he is anti-imperial and builds an alternative world, communities, and practices (Horsley; Wan; Ramsaran; Heen). For others, especially women scholars, he is much more ambivalent, resisting yet imitating and reinscribing imperial structures of gender and status (Kittredge; Briggs; Wright). For Callahan, Paul is accommodationist in that while revolution is not possible, emancipatory practices and community are necessary and contestive means of negotiation "in the meantime" until the divine intervention and completion of God's purposes (also Elliott's treatment of Rom 13). Both Schüssler Fiorenza and Wire make the point that attention to Paul must not tune out the other voices, especially those of women and slaves, in the assemblies of which his is only one voice. Moreover, Wire notes that such voices and their practices (opposed by Paul) may be more anti-imperial than Paul's expressed wishes and that Paul's rhetoric can be quite imperial in asserting his will.

## SELECTIVE FURTHER DISCUSSIONS

These publications reflect the work of some of the leading scholars who have engaged the question of Paul's negotiation of the Roman Empire. But it would be a mistake to suggest that this has been the only locus of engagement with this question. Various conferences<sup>48</sup> and periodicals<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup>For example, Union Theological Seminary, New York, October 2004 and April 2008.

<sup>49</sup>For example, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59 (2005); *Word and World* 25 (spring 2005).

have also explored this issue. Various books and studies have focused on aspects of this question.<sup>50</sup> In 2007, for example, the *Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament* offered chapter-length discussions of each of Paul's letters in relation to Roman and contemporary imperial power.<sup>51</sup> In a book-length study, Neil Elliott examines Romans as the interplay between Paul's letter to the churches in Rome and Roman imperial ideology.<sup>52</sup> Recognizing the constraints that imperial ideology places on Paul and from which he cannot escape, Elliott focuses his discussion around aspects of Roman power, its *imperium* or rule by force, *iustitia* or justice and the justice of God, *clementia* or mercy for the subjugated, *pietas* (that of Aeneas and Abraham), and *virtus* or virtue.

Also noteworthy are contributions that have offered critique of or have developed aspects of this work summarized above. One critique has come from Schüssler Fiorenza, both in a response included in *Paul and Empire* and in several books.<sup>53</sup> She argues among other things that these studies of Paul, especially those by males, have tended to identify with Paul, appropriating his authority to themselves, privilege Paul "the powerful creator and unquestioned leader" at the expense of other voices in the assemblies, overemphasize the oppositional stance of Christian writings to the empire, and overlook Paul's reinscribing of structures of domination. Moreover, they have often focused on the past and neglected the present function of imperializing language for God and obedience-requiring rhetoric for readers. Such language and rhetoric need deconstructing so that contemporary readers and biblical studies, conscious of this reinscription, can engage the public task of resisting empire, "constructing a scriptural ethos of radical democracy, which provides an historical alternative to the language [and praxis] of empire."<sup>54</sup> In pluriform communities (*ekklesia* or *politeuma*, Phil 3:20) of difference, plurivocality, argument, persuasion, democratic participation, emancipatory struggle, and theological vision for egalitarian movements and against kyriarchal (male, imperial) leadership, a radical critique of oppressive "earthly" structures, shaped by God's justice and well-being, is possible in the present.

---

<sup>50</sup>For example, Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).

<sup>51</sup>Fernando Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, eds., *Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

<sup>52</sup>Neil Elliott, *Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

<sup>53</sup>Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*; idem, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), esp. 1–33, and "Paul and the Politics of Interpretation," in Horsley, *Paul and Politics*, 40–57.

<sup>54</sup>Schüssler Fiorenza, *Power of the Word*, 7.

Schüssler Fiorenza's attention to the empire-inscribing function of Paul's writing and her formulation of an alternative, contemporary way of proceeding are well-placed, though the latter should not be emphasized at the expense of attention to Paul's imperial negotiation. This approach to Paul is very recent and remains either neglected or strongly contested by parts of the guild and the church. Moreover, it should not be overlooked, as much hermeneutical theory attests, that explicit attention to the inscription of empire in Paul's writings also embraces contemporary imperialism, whether that of global capitalism or nation states, given that interpreters do not leave their worlds and interests behind in interpreting texts.

Also engaging contemporary dimensions of Paul's negotiation of the Roman Empire is John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed's *In Search of Paul* (2004).<sup>55</sup> This far-reaching and thoughtful reading of Paul takes his imperial context seriously, and a significant percentage of the book, often drawing on archaeological and classical studies, is given over to helpful delineations of imperial structures and realities. One of the book's subtitles—*How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom*—indicates that Crossan and Reed see Paul in essentially antithetical or oppositional relationship to the empire. They contrast in chapter 2, for example, the clash of two visions of peace—one through military victory (the empire's) and one through justice (Paul's and God's). In chapter 3, they draw a contrast between Rome's Golden Age and Paul's eschatology (1 Thessalonians). In chapter 4, they contrast the blessings of Romanization with gospel blessings (Galatians). In chapter 5, two contrasting understandings of divinity emerge (Philippians; 2 Corinthians). In chapter 6, hierarchical patronage clashes with Christian equality (1 Corinthians). In chapter 7, imperial power, with its fundamental distinction between the haves and have-nots, collides with Paul's vision of global unity under God's distributive (not retributive) justice (Romans). Throughout, they emphasize a fundamental contrast between "the normalcy of civilization itself" and Paul's communities that embody new creation in "freedom, democracy, and human rights" (xi). With this overarching theme and styling of empire as the "normalcy of civilization," Crossan and Reed take a significant step often lacking in the three volumes edited by Horsley. Their analysis of Paul not only concerns first-century Paul's opposition to the Roman Empire but also engages fundamental questions of contemporary human community and commitments. Empire is also a contemporary

---

<sup>55</sup>John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom: A New Vision of Paul's Words and World* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2004).

phenomenon, and Paul continues to challenge and inform negotiation of it by contemporary followers of Jesus. “A subtext of *In Search of Paul* is therefore: To What Extent can America be Christian? We are now the greatest postindustrial civilization as Rome was then the greatest preindustrial one. That is precisely what makes Paul’s challenge equally forceful for now as for then. . . .” (xi).

Crossan and Reed, along with many of the contributions from the Paul and Politics group, posit a fundamentally antithetical relationship between Paul and the empire. The British scholar Peter Oakes explores the relationship between Paul and empire by discussing 1 Thessalonians and Philippians.<sup>56</sup> In relation to terminology shared by Christians and the empire, and to possible systemic interactions in matters such as authority, Oakes posits four possible forms of interaction: Rome and Christianity follow common models from the past; Christianity follows or imitates Rome; Rome conflicts with and pressures Christianity; Christianity conflicts with Rome. Oakes concludes that 1 Thessalonians evidences the fourth option, though Paul does not seek Rome’s overthrow. In Philippians, options three and four are evident. The particular conflicts center on Christology and eschatology, though in contrast to some other studies (e.g., Donfried above), Oakes does not see participation in the imperial cult as significant. Rather, he argues that Paul redraws or remaps space and time, decentering Rome’s power by placing Christ at the center and strengthening suffering Christians with the assurance that they have there a safe place.

Along with his other related work,<sup>57</sup> Oakes’s attempt to delineate accurately the nuances and complexities of interaction between Christians and the empire is helpful. Oakes’s fourfold model usefully identifies some of the possible interactions, though it is not entirely satisfactory. The first category concerns the origin of common motifs. But investigating the origin of various concepts—whether in biblical traditions or in pre-Roman Hellenistic kingship ideology or elsewhere—contributes little to discerning Christian-empire relations. Whatever its origin, material can function in the present in a host of ways, as Oakes seems to recognize in his comments on κρότοι and rituals associated with officials entering Greek cities. The second category recognizes that imitation is a significant part of negotiating imperial power, yet Oakes’s conclusions emphasize conflict while imitation largely disappears. A spectrum of overlapping

---

<sup>56</sup>Peter Oakes, “Re-mapping the Universe: Paul and the Emperor in 1 Thessalonians and Philippians,” *JSNT* 27 (2005): 301–22.

<sup>57</sup>Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (SNTSMS 110; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).



and interconnected strategies seems to be a preferable way of engaging the matter. His conclusion in which his fourth category of conflict dominates needs more nuancing. Oakes's recognition, for instance, of Paul's use of eschatology ignores the imperially imitative quality of eschatology, and his claim that Paul does not express a desire for Rome's overthrow because Paul does not emphasize this dimension is difficult to sustain. James Scott's work emphasizes that marginalized and relatively powerless groups express opposition often in self-protective ways, avoiding explicit confrontations but relying on audiences to elaborate coded and implicit messages. A declaration from Paul that his eschatological scenarios mean the end of specific opposing realities seems rhetorically unlikely. Oakes's notion of "conflict" needs closer definition.

Work by Davina Lopez elaborates a further dimension surfaced in previous work, that of gender dimensions in both Roman imperial representations and in Paul's negotiation of the empire as "apostle to the nations/Gentiles."<sup>58</sup> Lopez discusses visual images—a Judea Capta coin, the cuirassed statue of Augustus from Prima Porta, and the statues from Aphrodisias—to argue that Rome commonly personified conquered "nations" subjected to Roman power as women subjected to male power. "The nations" are defeated, collective femininity, united in being subject to manly Roman power. She argues that Paul's use of the language of "the nations/Gentiles" (τὰ ἔθνη) is not adequately understood as an ethnic and/or theological division between Jews and the rest but as an imperial/political term depicting the nations subjugated by and to Rome. Paul's call as an apostle "among the nations" (Gal 1:15) means "being changed into a different *man* and even a *woman* of sorts" (her emphasis).<sup>59</sup> He abandons violent, masculine "power over" persecution, renouncing "his previous affirmation of the power relations made natural by Roman imperial ideology."<sup>60</sup> He identifies with the subjugated and vulnerable as their mother (Gal 4:19) in a new creation marked by the solidarity of Jews with other nations ("united nations" with common ancestry from Abraham) in resistance to Rome's imperially divided world of conqueror and conquered. Such an image "challenges and reconfigures [Paul's] world in gendered terms that stand in contrast to those of the dominant paradigm of his time."<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Davina Lopez, "Before Your Very Eyes: Roman Imperial Ideology, Gender Constructs and Paul's Inter-Nationalism," in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourse* (ed. Todd Penner and Caroline vander Stichele; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 115–62; idem, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

<sup>59</sup> Lopez, "Before Your Very Eyes," 154.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

## AREAS FOR FURTHER WORK

Further work will need to refine the central question of Paul's negotiation of the Roman Empire. The emerging complex picture indicates the unsatisfactory nature of any attempt to identify or impose a monolithic stance. Specifically, the frequent appeal to Paul's apocalyptic thinking and use of Jewish eschatological traditions needs problematizing. Such traditions are anti-imperial, as is frequently recognized, but they are also imitative of imperial strategies, including the universal imposition of power and rule and the often violent exclusion and destruction of opponents. The ambivalence of opposition and imitation is not commonly recognized. A similar examination of Paul's Christology (Lord? Savior? Son of God? Christ?) and apostolic authority in community formation is also needed. Titles such as "Lord" and "Savior," as well as claims that Jesus is a counter-emperor or victorious over the Roman order, express an equally imperial framework. That is, while Rome's imperialism must be exposed, so too must Paul's.

While the work to date draws on various disciplines such as classical and feminist studies, engagement with social science models seems minimal and may be worthwhile. The models of empire developed, for instance, by Gerhard Lenski and John Kautsky have proved significant in other NT work but get less attention in Pauline studies.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, while there has been much attention to rhetoric, especially in terms of elite imperial models, Elliott's call for a sustained exploration of Paul's rhetoric in relation to imperial and colonial rhetoric as evident, for instance, in the work of Scott, needs attention.<sup>63</sup>

The foregrounding of Paul's negotiation with the Roman imperial world is paradigm-shifting in Pauline studies. Wright's plea, though, that insights from the work of recent decades concerning Paul's Jewish identity and interaction not be lost or neglected in such a paradigm shift is well stated.<sup>64</sup> The challenge seems to be to not overcorrect the lengthy and sustained neglect of Paul's negotiation of the Roman imperial world at the expense of his interaction with first-century Judaism. Paul participates in both worlds. One way ahead lies in the recognition that like Paul and the believers' communities, first-century Judaisms are also participants in and negotiating Rome's world.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup>For a summary, see Dennis Duling, "Empire: Theories, Methods, Models," in *Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context* (ed. John Riches and David Sim; London: T&T Clark, 2005), 49–74.

<sup>63</sup>Elliott, "Paul and the Politics of Empire," in Horsley, *Paul and Politics*, 27–33.

<sup>64</sup>Wright, "Paul's Gospel," in Horsley, *Paul and Politics*, 163.

<sup>65</sup>See Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), ch. 2.

Discussions engage prominently three of the four interrelated areas outlined in the aims of the Paul and Politics group (Paul and the politics of the churches, the politics of Israel, and the politics of the Roman Empire). Receiving less explicit attention, apart from the work of Schüssler Fiorenza, is the fourth area, Paul and the politics of interpretation. Issues concerning women and slavery receive good attention, but there is limited discussion of the deuteropaulines, let alone of texts from the second century and later. There is much to explore in Paul's legacy and the history of interpretation. Horsley recognizes the irony of an imperial Christ as Lord in his introduction to the third volume when he writes that Paul's use of imperial christological and eschatological images "bequeathed imperial images of Christ to the church that became the established imperial religion under Constantine and remained so in Western Europe."<sup>66</sup> How much of this legacy should be on the agenda of Paul and Politics discussion?

While attention has focused on Paul and the politics of his churches, Israel, the Roman Empire, and the interpretive guild, much less attention has focused on Paul and the politics of contemporary churches. This neglect seems strange given Paul's significant presence in the church's canon. How might this important rereading of Paul address contemporary faith communities engaging his writings as Scripture?

### FOR FURTHER READING

Carter, Warren. *Households and Discipleship: A Study of Matthew 19–20*. JSNTSup 103. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994.

———. *John and Empire: Initial Explorations*. New York: T&T Clark, 2008.

———. *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000.

———. *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006.

Crossan, John Dominic, and Jonathan Reed. *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom: A New Vision of Paul's Words and World*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2004.

Duling, Dennis. "Empire: Theories, Methods, Models." Pages 49–74 in *Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context*. Edited by John Riches and David Sim. London: T&T Clark, 2005.

Elliott, Neil. *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008.

---

<sup>66</sup>Horsley, "Introduction," *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, 23.

- Horsley, Richard, ed. *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997.
- . *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000.
- . *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2004.
- Lopez, Davina. *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008.
- . "Before Your Very Eyes: Roman Imperial Ideology, Gender Constructs and Paul's Inter-Nationalism." Pages 115–62 in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourse*. Edited by Todd Penner and Caroline vander Stichele. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- Oakes, Peter. *Philippians: From People to Letter*. SNTSMS 110. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- . "Re-mapping the Universe: Paul and the Emperor in 1 Thessalonians and Philippians." *JSNT* 27 (2005): 301–22.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007.
- . *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999.
- Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Segovia, Fernando. "'And They Began to Speak in Other Tongues': Competing Forms of Discourse in Contemporary Biblical Discourse." Pages 1–32 in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*. Edited by Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995.
- Segovia, Fernando, and R. S. Sugirtharajah, eds. *Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*. London: T&T Clark, 2007.
- Stendahl, Krister. "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West." *HTR* 56 (1963): 199–215.
- Wire, Antoinette. *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction Through Paul's Rhetoric*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990.