Paul and Caesar: A New Reading of Romans


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Introduction

We have moved away quite rapidly in recent years from the old split, which was assumed by and built into the fabric of Western biblical studies, between ‘religion’ and ‘politics’. We have come to see that trying to separate the two in the ancient world, not least in the Middle East, is as futile as trying to do so in certain parts of the modern world. There is a quantum leap now being made from the old way of reading the Bible, in which certain political ‘implications’ could be drawn here and there from texts which were (of course) about something else, and the occasional concentration on rather isolated texts — one thinks of the ‘Tribute question’ in the synoptic tradition, and of the notorious first paragraph of Romans 13 — as being the only places in the New Testament at least where real ‘political’ issues came to the fore. (Until recently, Revelation remained outside the implicit canon of many New Testament scholars, and even when it was considered its striking political significance was often limited to reflections on its thirteenth chapter.)

Now, however, we have all been alerted to the fact that the kingdom of God was itself, and remained, a thoroughly political concept; that Jesus’ death was a thoroughly political event; that the existence and growth of the early church was a matter of community-building, in conflict, often enough, with other communities. There is of course a danger, not always avoided in recent studies, of seeing the New Testament now simply the other way up but still within the Enlightenment paradigm: in other words, of declaring that it’s all ‘politics’ and that to read it as ‘religion’ or ‘theology’ is to domesticate or privatize it. The fact that for some that might still be so doesn’t excuse us from doing our best to reintegrate what the Enlightenment had pulled apart, both in the name of serious ancient historical study and in the name of responsible biblical study for today’s world.

I want in this paper to introduce, by means of a sharply focused piece of exegesis, the question of how to rethink and remap Paul within this new world.[1] I have a proposal to make which I have been developing for the last few years in dialogue with a group of scholars, mostly American, who are working in this area, whose most obvious leader is Richard A. Horsley of the University of Massachusetts, the editor of two volumes of collected essays entitled Paul and Empire and Paul and Politics.[2] To understand where this proposal is coming from and going to, we need to back up for a moment and consider what’s been happening in Pauline studies over the last generation.

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, Pauline studies received a shot in the arm which still continues to invigorate — or, depending on your point of view, a deep wound from which it is still trying to recover. In his Paul and Palestinian Judaism, E.P. Sanders offered what one writer called a ‘new perspective on Paul’.[3] Sanders’ main thesis, which I regard as securely established in outline if not in all its details, is that the picture of Judaism assumed in most Protestant readings of Paul is historically inaccurate and theologically misleading: first-century Jews were not proto-Pelagians, and Paul did not attack them as such. Sanders’ thesis was explicitly advanced as a case about the religion of Judaism and of Paul; this was always a partial proposal, screening out or downplaying large areas of Pauline theology, so that the responses to Sanders from aggrieved Protestant theologians have sometimes missed the target.[4] Sanders’ proposal had its own agenda at the level of the study of religions; it was not the same sort of thing as the Lutheran perspective it controverted, and indeed it was in some ways a plea to see Christianity from a modernist comparative-religion perspective rather than a classic theological one. These questions invite further reflection for which this is not the place.

The subsequent debates as to the validity of the ‘new perspective’ as a whole and in its parts (with such related matters as the interplay between covenant and apocalyptic, and the phrase ‘the faith of/in Jesus Christ’) have continued to engage scholars and to inform different readings of the text.[5] I do not wish to suggest that this phase of work could or should now come to an end. I wish rather to
complicate matters by suggesting that there is a whole further dimension to Paul which both old and new perspectives have ignored, and which must be factored in to subsequent discussion.

A Fresh Perspective?

I begin with a fact that I confess I had not appreciated until very recently, which is itself revealing about the directions in which New Testament scholarship has been looking and not looking. In the Mediterranean world where Paul exercised his vocation as the apostle to the Gentiles, the pagans, the fastest growing religion was the Imperial cult, the worship of Caesar.[6]

In Rome itself, as is well known, the Julio-Claudian emperors did not receive explicit divine honours until after their deaths, although being hailed as the son of the newly deified Julius was an important part of Augustus’ profile, and that of his successors, at home as well as abroad. But in the East — and the East here starts, effectively, in Greece, not just in Egypt — the provinces saw no need for restraint. With a long tradition of ruler-cults going back at least to Alexander the Great, local cities and provinces were in many cases only too happy to demonstrate their loyalty to the emperor by establishing a cult in his honour, and in need by vying for the privilege of looking after his shrine.[7]

This feature of the Roman empire has been extensively studied, and the continuing debates — on, for instance, the precise relationship between this cult and that of earlier Eastern rulers — do not affect the basic point I am making. The religious world of the day was of course thoroughly pluralistic, and there was no expectation that this new cult would displace, or itself be threatened by, the traditional Graeco-Roman religions in all their variety. Indeed, frequently the two were combined, as demonstrated by statues of the emperor in the guise of Jupiter or another well-known god.[8] But, whereas traditional books and lecture courses that cover the religious world of late antiquity tend to add the emperor-cult simply as one element within a treatment of the multiple religions, philosophies and theologies of the ancient world, giving students the impression that it was a relatively insignificant addition to more important aspects of pagan thought and life, it is increasingly apparent that to many ordinary people in Greece, Asia Minor, the Middle East and Egypt — with the exception of the last, the focal points of Paul’s missionary work — the Caesar-cult was fast-growing, highly visible, and powerful precisely in its interweaving of political and religious allegiance. As various writers have recently urged, you don’t need such a strong military presence to police an empire if the citizens are worshipping the emperor. Conversely, where Rome had brought peace to the world, giving salvation from chaos, creating a new sense of unity out of previously warring pluralities, there was a certain inevitability about Rome itself, and the emperor as its ruler, being seen as divine. Rome had done — Augustus had done — the sort of thing that only gods can do. Rome had power: the power to sweep aside all opposition; the power, in consequence, to create an extraordinary new world order. Rome claimed to have brought justice to the world; indeed, the goddess Iustitia was an Augustan innovation, closely associated with the principate.[9] The accession of the emperor, and also his birthday, could therefore be hailed as euaggelion, good news (we should remember of course that most of the empire, and certainly the parts of it where Paul worked, were Greek-speaking). The emperor was the kyrios, the lord of the world, the one who claimed the allegiance and loyalty of subjects throughout his wide empire. When he came in person to pay a state visit to a colony or province, the word for his royal presence was parousia.

With all this in mind, we open the first page of Paul’s letters as they stand in the New Testament, and what do we find?[10] We find Paul, writing a letter to the church in Rome itself, introducing himself as the accredited messenger of the one true God. He brings the gospel, the euaggelion, of the son of God, the Davidic Messiah, whose messiahship and divine sonship are validated by his resurrection, and who, as the Psalms insist, is the Lord, the kyrios, of the whole world. Paul’s task is to bring the world, all the nations, into loyal allegiance — hypakoē pisteos, the obedience of faith — to this universal Lord. He is eager to announce this euaggelion in Rome, without shame, because this message is the power of God which creates salvation for all who are loyal to it, Jew and Greek alike. Why is this? Because in this message (this ‘gospel of the son of God’), the justice of God, the dikaiosynē theou, is unveiled. Those of us who have read Romans, written essays on Romans, lectured on Romans, preached on Romans, written books about Romans over many years, may be excused if we rub our eyes in disbelief. Most commentators on Romans 1:1-17 insist that it forms the thematic introduction to the whole letter. None that I know of (myself included) have suggested that it must have been heard in Rome, and that Paul must have intended it, as a parody of the imperial cult.
If we go for a moment to the other end of Romans, the impression is the same. The thematic exposition concludes with 15:7-13, where the mutual welcome of Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian in the one family of God in Christ, producing united worldwide worship in fulfilment of scriptural prophecy, is the goal of the whole gospel. Paul builds up a careful sequence of scriptural passages to make the point, emphasizing on the way the universality off the rule of Jesus Christ, the kyrios (Ps. 117:1, quoted in v. 11, repeats ‘all’: all the nations, all the peoples). The final quotation is from Isaiah 11:10, one of Isaiah’s great messianic passages, and Paul has chosen a passage which, in its Septuagintal form, looks right back to Romans 1:3f: ‘The root of Jesse shall appear, the one who rises up (ho anistamenos) to rule the nations; in him shall the nations hope.’ Jesus’ Davidic messiahship, once more, is confirmed by his resurrection, and means that he is the true ruler of the nations. This cannot, I suggest, be other than a direct challenge to the present ruler of the nations, Caesar himself.

Austin Farrer, when lecturing on Romans in Oxford in the early 1950s, used to read Romans 1:8-15 aloud, and run straight on to 15:14 and the following passage. He would then ask his hearers: why did Paul break off and include all that other material? In similar fashion I want to pose the question: if Paul has framed this great letter with an introduction and a theological conclusion which seem so clearly to echo, and thus to challenge, the rule of Caesar with the rule of Jesus Christ, is the rest of the letter in some sense about this as well, and if so, how? And what does this do to all our traditional readings of Paul, in both old and new perspectives?

Before I can address this, some initial comments are in order on where we have come so far.

Initial Comments

First, a note about scholarly treatment of Romans 1:3-4. When I was first working on Romans in the mid-1970s, I was conscious of what I can only call a powerful undertow in scholarship that resisted any attempt to allow Paul to be interested in, let alone to affirm or make central, the Davidic messiahship of Jesus. Romans 1:3-4 was regularly seen as a pre-Pauline formula — not so much, I suggest, for reasons of its structure and phraseology, but because messiahship, especially with an explicit reference to David, was deemed to be extraneous to Paul’s theology.[11] Commentators then regularly hurried on to 1:16-17, which was seen as the real statement of the theme of the letter, and indeed of the gospel’. I thought then, and think still, that this represents part of a de-Judaizing of Paul, an insistence that he cannot have thought in categories like messiahship; and I have argued extensively for the opposite point of view elsewhere.[12] I now realize that this tendency also represents part of a depoliticizing of Paul, a desire to move his theology away from confrontation with the powers of the world and into the safer sphere of a faith, a religion, a theology in which the only thing one needs to say about the rulers of the world is that God has ordained them and that they must in principle be obeyed. (I shall return to Rom. 13 in due course.) The roots of this de-Judaizing and depoliticizing of Paul are outside the scope of this paper, but I suspect they would not be hard to find.

My second comment is to note that Romans is by no means unique in having this apparent covert reference to, and subversion of, Caesar.[13] I have written elsewhere of how Philippians 2:5-11 and 3:19-21 can be seen to have explicit reference to the imperial cult and theme, with, once more, the main thrust that Jesus Christ is the true kyrios of the world, so that of course Caesar is not. Indeed, I have argued that the whole of Philippians 3 can and should be read as a covert anti-imperial exhortation: as Paul had abandoned his Jewish privileges to find Christ, so the Philippian should be prepared, at least, not to take advantage of their belonging to a Roman colony, with the same end in view (finding Christ). Philippi was, of course, a Roman colony (not all of the Philippian Christians were Roman citizens, but all will have gained, or might have expected to gain, as a result of being part of the colonial city).[14] It can be shown that some hints in 1 Thessalonians run the same way: when people say ‘peace and security’, then sudden destruction will come upon them unawares (1 Thes. 5:3). And ‘peace and security’, it has been argued, was part of the Roman propaganda of the first-century empire.[15]

Third, while highlighting the imperial context of Paul’s writings, and proposing that at least at some points Paul is consciously parodying and subverting imperial ideology, I do not at all suggest that Paul derived his theology, either in outline or in detail, from the world of Graeco-Roman paganism in general or the imperial cult in particular. We must not confuse derivation with confrontation. Some
who have made these connections seem to be using them as a way of rolling back fifty years of work, from W.D. Davies to E.P. Sanders and beyond, of locating Paul within the world of Second Temple Judaism and returning history instead to an earlier history-of-religions project in which Paul derived his central themes from the non-Jewish world of late antiquity. As I hope I have already indicated, but here wish to emphasize, my reading depends precisely on Paul being and remaining a Jewish thinker, addressing the pagan world with the news that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the true God, and that this God has now proved the point by raising from the dead Jesus who is thereby the Jewish Messiah and therefore the Lord of the whole world. This, indeed, is the logic underneath the whole Gentile mission — not that Paul was abandoning Judaism, but claiming to fulfil it. Here not for the last time we find fascinating parallels between Paul and the roughly contemporary Wisdom of Solomon, which addresses the rulers of the world with the news that Israel’s God is the true God who not only gives wisdom to rulers, but who will vindicate his people against pagan oppression.

Fourth, if there is indeed a reference to Caesar and his cult in Romans Philippians and elsewhere, it would be a mistake to universalize this and suppose that Paul is covertly opposing Caesar in all sorts of other places as well. The theme is not so obvious in the Corinthian correspondence, though a case has recently been made for seeing it there too. It is even harder to see this theme in Galatians — though there, too, a recent writer has attempted to do so. Rather, I suggest that Paul’s anti-imperial stance is part of a wider strain in his thinking which has also been marginalized in many systematic treatments of his thought, but which should be acknowledged and rehabilitated: the confrontation between the gospel and the powers of the world, between the gospel and paganism in general. Paul’s gospel remained thoroughly Jewish: his critique of idolatry and immorality, again paralleled in the wisdom tradition, is the standard wide-ranging Jewish critique, sharpened up but not significantly modified through the gospel of Jesus. The fresh perspective I am proposing, that we take seriously Paul’s subversive references to Caesar, is part of the larger point I have made in various places: that we take Paul seriously as the Jewish apostle to the pagan world, and think through his theology and religion not just as the outworking of a Jewish history-of-religion in the abstract, but as confrontation with paganism in its many varieties — the Caesar-cult being one of the most powerful, high-profile, fast-growing and usually ignored in scholarship.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, I am not proposing that we give up looking at Paul as a theologian and read him simply as a covert politician. There is a danger, which Horsley and his colleagues have not always avoided, of ignoring the major theological themes in Paul and simply plundering parts of his writings to find help in addressing the political concerns of the contemporary Western world. To be sure, Paul has not been much used in Christian political thinking, and much work remains to be done in this area. But we would be foolish to suppose that we could substitute a one-dimensional political reading for a one-dimensional theological one. On the contrary: my proposal is that we recognize in Paul, in full integration, what post-Enlightenment Western culture has pulled apart. Our struggles over the integration of faith and history, of church and society, of natural and supernatural, simply did not look like that in the first century. The question is, rather, how we can appropriately describe what appear to us as ‘different dimensions of Paul’s thought’ in ways that will do justice to the exegesis of the text, and that will also, perhaps, give to the early twenty-first century a lesson in joined-up thinking. It is perhaps ironic that theologians and exegetes should find themselves discovering the importance of serious political thought just when politicians themselves seem finally to have abandoned it.

Towards a Multi-Dimensional Fresh Reading of Paul

Once all these issues are raised, it should be clear that we shall not do justice to Paul simply by arranging bits and pieces of his letters according to the doctrinal schemes of regular dogmatic theology — God, humankind, sin, salvation, and so forth — or according to the patterns of religion (getting in, staying in, and the like). Doctrinal belief matters; religious theory and practice matter; but they matter as part of a larger whole, and I am suggesting that this larger whole must include Paul’s sense of the conflict of the gospel with the principalities and powers in general and with Rome, and Caesar, in particular. How can we describe all of this coherently without allowing one element to gain a false prominence over the others?

I have elsewhere proposed a method of worldview analysis, which I have employed on a large scale in my historical treatment of Jesus. Worldviews, I have suggested, can be understood as a
combination of praxis, story, symbol and theory, which give rise to, and are expressed within, a set of aims and motives on the one hand and of specific beliefs, at various levels, on the other. Without entering into a full exploration of this, I will offer a bird’s-eye view of some of these elements, attempting to show how the fresh perspective I am proposing not only finds a place alongside other elements, but changes the shape and balance of the whole. This will lead me back, in my final main section, to some further reflections on the parts of Romans between 1:1-17 and 15:7-13.

The passages I have just mentioned, and the rest of Romans 15, offer quite a full statement of Paul’s aims and motivations, which are backed up by what we know of his actual habitual praxis (in other words, we have good reason to think that what he says to the Romans about his overall goals is not just a rhetorical smokescreen, but really does represent the way he thought). He believed himself to have a unique vocation from the God of Israel, the creator and covenant God, which put him in debt to the whole world, since it was his task to bring to the world the announcement that Jesus was Lord and that God had raised him from the dead. His developed strategy for obedience to this vocation involved the sustained work of proclamation and church development in Greece and Asia Minor, with Jerusalem and Antioch as his back markers; now it was time to move to Italy, Spain, and presumably (though he does not mention it) Gaul. His aim was to extend the rule of Jesus, the world’s true Lord, planting cells of people loyal to Jesus, whose loyalty would be evidenced not least by their unity across traditional ethnic and cultural lines. To that end, he had taken a collection from Gentile churches and was on his way to Jerusalem to give it to the Jewish Christians there; it was a powerful symbol that Jesus is Lord and that the principalities and powers, who kept the world divided up into separate categories and allegiances, were not.

Paul’s symbolic praxis as outlined in Romans 15 thus points to the controlling narrative out of which he was living, which can of course be checked against the various stories he tells, explicitly and implicitly, throughout his writings. We may trace six interlocking stories, working from the largest scale to the smallest. In each case, the story is about the one true God, revealed in climactic and decisive action in Jesus and the Spirit, challenging and defeating rival gods. It is, in other words, a Christian variation on regular Second-Temple Jewish stories, confronting, as did many such stories, the world of paganism.

The outer story that Paul tells frequently, not least in Romans, is the story of creation and new creation. This is the Jewish story of a good creator God bringing to birth a good creation, and then, when creation has been spoiled by the rebellion of humankind, accomplishing its rescue not by abandoning the old and starting afresh, but as an act of new creation out of the old. The resurrection of Jesus is, for Paul, the prototype of the new creation; the Spirit is the agent, already at work. Paul applies to the creation itself the motif of the exodus, of redemption from slavery.

The second story is the covenantal narrative from Abraham, through Moses and the prophets, to the Messiah, and on to the mission of the covenant God to the wider non-Jewish world. Again, this is seen classically in Romans, particularly in 9:6—10:21, but is everywhere presupposed and frequently alluded to. As with the story of creation, the covenant story is of God’s original design spoiled by sin, this time by the rebellion of the covenant people, highlighted and exacerbated by the law. But, once more, God’s solution is not to destroy and start from scratch, but to redeem through the new exodus, which has been accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit.

The third story is that of Jesus himself. Paul notoriously has little to say about the life of Jesus prior to the crucifixion, but there should be no doubt that he regarded Jesus’ public career as messianic; the resurrection alone would not have been sufficient to convince him that someone was the Messiah unless it vindicated what had gone before. Every time Paul tells the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection it comes out differently, but the constant note is, as he says in the summary tradition in 1 Corinthians 15, that it took place ‘according to the scriptures’. What he means by this is not just that these events fulfilled a few specific prophecies, but that they brought the long story of Israel to its God-ordained climax and goal, in both its positive aspects (focused especially on the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham) and its negative aspects (focused especially on the ambiguous role of the law). The narrative of Jesus is, for Paul, the supreme revelation of the one true God. In the gospel, God’s justice and love are revealed definitively and decisively. This is again, of course, central to Romans (3:21-26; 5:6-10).
In the complex relation of this third narrative to the first two we find the heart of what can loosely be called Paul’s atonement-theology; but we also find, in one of the most powerful moves within the fresh perspective I am proposing, Paul’s treatment of the cross as the means of the defeat of the powers. As everyone in the Roman world knew well, the cross already had a clear symbolic meaning; it meant that Caesar ruled the world, with cruel death as his ultimate, and regular, weapon.[22] For Paul, throughout his writings, the cross is far more than simply the means whereby individual sins are forgiven, though of course it is that as well. It is the means whereby the powers are defeated and overthrown (1 Cor. 2:6-8; Col. 2:13-15). The resurrection demonstrates that the true God has a power utterly superior to that of Caesar. The cross is thus to be seen, with deep and rich paradox, as the secret power of this true God, the power of self-giving love which (as Jesus said it would) subverts the power of the tyrant (Mk. 10:35-45).

The fourth story Paul tells is the story of the church, the renewed people of God in Christ. In one sense, of course, this is an aspect of the second story: the church is not something other than the multi-ethnic family God promised to Abraham. But Paul also, I think, tells this story as complete in itself, because in the present age of inaugurated eschatology, living between Jesus’ resurrection and his final reappearing, the church goes through its own complete cycle of call, mission, suffering, struggle and vindication. The very existence of the church is an affront to the principalities and powers in general (Eph. 3:10) and to Caesar in particular, because here within his empire is a growing group of people giving allegiance to a different lord — as Luke says, to ‘another king’ (Acts 17:7). The church, through its exodus-shaped life (1 Cor. 10:1-13), is also a revelation of the true God. Paul’s strong pneumatology, which he does not retract in the face of muddle, sin and rebellion in the Corinthian church, ensures that he sees the very existence, let alone the obedient life, of the church as a vital sign to the world of who its rightful God and Lord now are.

The fifth story is that of the individual Christian. (We may note in passing how narrow has been the focus of much study of Paul, limited to stories 3 and 5, with only occasional glances at 1, 2 and 4.) The call of each person to hear the gospel, and to respond in believing obedience, is vital to Paul, even though what he means by ‘justification’ is hardly what the majority of Christian theologians have meant by that term since at least Augustine. The story Paul tells about how people become Christians is clear at several points. The gospel is preached — that is, Jesus is announced as the risen Lord of the world — and God’s power is thereby unleashed, through the Spirit, who causes some hearers, no doubt to their surprise, to believe it (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 12:3; 1 Thes. 1:4-5:2:13). Their submission to Jesus as Lord is expressed in the new-exodus symbolism of baptism, which by its link to Jesus’ death and resurrection is understood as bringing them ‘into Christ’, that is, into the Messiah’s people (Rom. 6:1-11; 1 Cor. 10:1-2; Gal. 3:26-29). They are thereby not only given secure promises of future salvation (Rom. 8:29-30; Phil. 1:6), but also charged with responsibilities and obligations in the present, including that of undergoing the suffering which will result from thus standing with the true God against the powers (Rom. 8:31-39; Phil. 1:29-30; 1 Thes. 3:3). And at every moment in this story they are turning away from the idols of their pagan past to serve a living and true God (1 Thes. 1:9-10); which must have meant, for many of Paul’s hearers as for his successors in the following centuries, turning away from the Caesar-cult and worshipping Jesus instead. Finally, all must appear before the bēma tou theou or tou Christou, the ‘judgement seat’, at which the true Lord, as opposed to Caesar and his delegated officers, would preside, justice would be seen to be done, and those who had already been declared to be God’s people on the basis of faith alone would have that declaration ratified in the final act of their being raised from the dead, and so ‘saved’ from the ultimate powers and ‘justified’, found to be in the right, before the final court.[23]

Controversially but crucially, when Paul uses the language of ‘justification’ he is not referring to this whole process, this ordo salutis. Rather, he is referring to God’s declaration about those who believe the gospel (confessing Jesus as Lord and believing that God raised him from the dead, as in Rom. 10:9; cf. 4:24-25). This faith is the solitary badge which marks out who belongs to God’s renewed, eschatological people; any attempt to propose other badges leaves the ‘powers’ still in charge. This divine declaration in the present only makes sense because it is based on the death and resurrection of Jesus in the past, and because it looks forward to the future judgement at which there will be ‘no condemnation’ for these same people because of what the Holy Spirit has done in their lives.[24] Those whom God justified, God has also glorified (Rom. 8:30). This is the basic meaning of justification by faith; this is how, in Romans, Galatians and elsewhere, it can be integrated with the fresh perspective I am proposing. The ‘faith’ because of which God justifies (in this sense) is a believing loyalty which upstages that demanded by Caesar; the ‘judgement’ which will be issued at
the last day, and which is anticipated in present ‘justification’, is by the one God, through the one Lord, as opposed to that meted out within Caesar’s system. The ‘gospel’ through which the Spirit works powerfully to bring people to this believing obedience, this loyalty, and so to justification, is the true gospel as opposed to that of Caesar. The true gospel focuses on the crucifixion of the Messiah as opposed to being backed up by the crucifixion of Caesar’s opponents.

The sixth story I have already told, but I recapitulate to make it clear. It is the story of Paul himself: Paul as, at one level, an agent of new creation; at another, the minister of the new covenant; at another, a member of Christ’s body; at another, the founder of the Gentile church; at another, a classic example of both a converted Jew and a converted human being, the unique apostle to the Gentiles. Paul sees his own story of mission and suffering, and his expectation of vindication, as revelations in action of the true God, and as embodiments of the exodus, through both of which the false gods — including now the idolatry of Israel’s own ethnic status and pride — are confronted and rebuked.

Paul’s narrative world thus integrates what theologians and historians of religion have regularly held apart, including indeed aspects which both have marginalized or ignored completely. The hardest question for the fresh perspective to face is: how can this be integrated with the traditional topics of Pauline theology (justification, the law, Christology, and so forth)? I believe that through this means, of worldview analysis and particularly narrative analysis, a way may be found towards a fuller answer, to which I shall presently return. Paul’s stories are all God-stories, confronting and subverting the stories of other gods; they all focus on Jesus and the Spirit, and on the new exodus, itself the unveiling of God’s sovereign power over the gods.

The symbols of Paul’s worldview are the outward and visible points at which the characteristic stories and praxis find expression. Preaching the gospel, baptism, the Eucharist, the collection, the coming together of Jew and Gentile in one body — all of these and more must count as symbols, signs within the world that a different God is at work, warnings to the powers that their time is up. That is why each of these arouses fierce opposition. To explore this would take us too far afield, but we must note that just as the Lord’s Supper was seen by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10-11 as the reality of which the pagan temple meals were the parody, so the summons to Jew and Gentile alike to worship Jesus as the ruler of all nations must be seen, from Paul’s point of view, as the reality of which Caesar’s grandiose claims were also the parody. And since that summons was absolutely central to all that Paul was and did, we must also declare that at the symbolic level, as well as at the level of praxis and narrative, his challenge to Caesar was central and decisive. When Polycarp of Smyrna refused the oath a hundred years later, he was being a true follower of Paul.[25]

How would Paul answer the five key world-view questions that comprise the level of theory?

1. Who are we? We are the people of God in Christ, indwelt by the Spirit. We are the renewed Israel, the people of the new covenant. We are those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord and believe that God raised him from the dead. And this defines us over against those who worship other gods, and other lords.

2. Where are we? We are in God’s good creation — citizens now not of a particular country so much as of the world that God is going to make, where we shall share the rule of the Lord Jesus. We are living, as it were, in a house that is being rebuilt around us, though there is yet to come a final moment of rebuilding on a scale hitherto unimaginable. We are part of the Jewish movement designed by God to spread to the ends of the earth. Our location is defined not by Caesars empire but by God’s creation and covenant.

3. What’s wrong? Though Jesus’ resurrection has ushered in the new creation, we live between that event and the redemption still awaited by ourselves and the rest of the world; and, since most of the world still does not acknowledge Jesus as Lord, we are persecuted. We ourselves, too, are not yet perfect, but live in the tension between what we are already, in Christ and by the Spirit, and what we shall be when Jesus appears again and when his work in us is complete. Caesar still rules the world, despite Jesus’ enthronement as its rightful Lord.
4. What’s the solution? The work of the Spirit, in the present and the future, will put into practice, for us and for the whole cosmos, what has been accomplished in Christ. God will put the world to rights, achieving at last what Caesar claimed to have done.

5. What time is it? We live in the overlap of the ages: the age to come has already broken in in Jesus, but the present age still continues. A great crisis is looming shortly, involving fierce suffering and worldwide convulsion, from which the church will emerge stronger; and one day, though nobody knows when, Jesus will reappear, when God finally remakes the cosmos. The Roman world is tottering; only God’s kingdom will last.

Out of praxis, story, symbol and theory there emerge not only aims and motivations, at which we have already glanced, but also explicit beliefs, or theology. Paul’s theology can best be understood as the radical revision, in the light of Jesus and the Spirit, of the triple Jewish beliefs of monotheism, election and eschatology. Just as each element of the Jewish theology Paul is modifying already stood over against the principalities and powers, so too, in his revision, each element continues to confront the powers of the world.

The Jewish belief in one God was always a polemical doctrine over against pagan idolatry. In some of its greatest expressions this opposition is explicit: the exodus was God’s victory over the gods and pharaoh of Egypt, and the revelation of God’s saving righteousness in Isaiah 40-55 meant the overthrow of Babylon, its rulers and its gods. Jews of the first century, especially hard-line Pharisees, would have had no difficulty in rereading these texts and others like them in relation to the victory of the true God over first-century paganism in general and the Caesar-cult in particular. The Wisdom of Solomon offers an instructive parallel. Paul, drawing upon these sources and rereading them around Jesus Christ and the Spirit, has given them new focus and application, and has thereby launched a movement in which the heirs of Israel’s Scriptures would confront paganism with a new weapon, looking for a new kind of victory. Paul’s high Christology and pneumatology, controversially forming the basis of the later doctrine of the Trinity, were designed as a way of giving Jewish monotheism a new focus and polemical power against the pagan gods, especially Caesar. Recognizing this raises interesting questions about what is really going on in the regular attempts to deny Paul’s high Christology.

The Jewish belief in the election of Israel to be the people of the one true God was always, likewise, a polemical doctrine over against pagan idolatry. The Torah, Israel’s covenant charter, is from one point of view a lengthy elaboration of what it means to have no gods but YHWH alone. Paul’s radical revision of the doctrine of election, focusing on justification by faith apart from works of Torah and on the creation in Christ and by the Spirit of the one body, the worldwide church, is simultaneously a challenge to all the powers, from Babylon to Rome, that tried to create new empires which gave unity, peace and justice to the wider world. For him, the intention of Torah is fulfilled in Christ and by the Spirit; those who are defined as God’s people in this renewed way are thereby defined over against the peoples who give allegiance to false gods, emperors included. The reflex of Paul’s revision — the continuing debate and sometimes bitter controversy with unbelieving Judaism, and with right-wing Jewish Christians — must be seen as just that, the reflex of his mission to the world, not as the centre in its own right of his theological understanding and endeavour.

Finally, the Jewish belief in the coming age when God’s righteousness would be unveiled in action, vindicating Israel, defeating pagan wickedness, and putting the whole world to rights, was always likewise a polemical doctrine over against paganism. One only has to think of Daniel to see how this played out. For Paul, the decisive revelation had already taken place in Jesus Christ, and his death and resurrection, through whom the age to come had been inaugurated; and the Spirit was now at work to complete what had been begun (through the resurrection) in the world, and (through the preaching of the gospel) in human beings. The Day of the Lord had split into two: the day which happened at Easter, and the day which was yet to come when Jesus reappeared and the cosmos was finally liberated. This radical revision of the Jewish doctrine was, like the rest, designed to enable Paul and his hearers to stand boldly and cheerfully as Christians despite the rage of the powers, including Caesar’s henchmen.

The fresh perspective I am proposing is not, then, an odd extraneous feature which might have crept in by accident, or might be read in by mistake, in Paul’s thinking. Polemic against the powers,
and against the blaspheming emperor-cult in particular, is to be expected precisely because of those Jewish traditions to which Paul was heir and which he reshaped around the gospel. How, finally, might this work out in a reading of Romans, with which we began?

**New Creation, New Covenant: The Heart of Romans**

In conclusion, I want to draw attention to key features of Romans which show, I believe, that the initially surprising fresh reading of its opening and closing are not accidental, but inform the whole — without detracting in any way from all the other things that Romans is about.

The centre of Romans, arguably, is the double climax of chapters 8 and 11. I cannot here go into the complex relation between the different sections of the letter; I simply comment that chapters 5-8 are a kind of formal centre, the tightly compressed driving motor for the rest, which energizes the discussions of major issues facing the Roman church in 9-11 and 12-15. Chapters 1-4 prepare the way for 5-8 in one way, and for 9-11 and 12-15 in other ways. There should be no doubt that Romans 8 forms one of the climactic moments of all Paul’s writing. It stands to the letter, and perhaps to his thought as a whole, like the climax of the Jupiter symphony to the preceding movements and, in a measure, to Mozart’s oeuvre as a whole. And the main thrust of Romans 8 — marginalized, ironically, in much Protestant exegesis! — is the renewal of all creation by God’s great act of new exodus. The cosmos itself will be redeemed, set free from slavery, liberated to share the freedom of the glory of God’s children. God’s children in turn have their inheritance, the new covenant equivalent of the promised land, in this entire new world. They will therefore, as Romans 5 stresses, share the reign of Jesus over the whole new world. This, I suggest, cannot be other than subversive when set as the climax of a letter to the small struggling church in Rome, whose emperor claimed to rule the world, whose poets had sung of the new age of peace, freedom and prosperity that had come to birth through Augustus’ defeat of all enemies. Though of course the vision of new creation is far more than a mere political polemic, in its context it must be seen as offering a vision which was bound to make other visions of world empire pale into insignificance as the cheap imitations they really were. God will put the world to rights; the dikaiosyne theou is that covenant faithfulness by which God will accomplish the new creation in which justice will triumph.

All is achieved, in Romans 5—8, by the love of God. David Aune has recently suggested, in his commentary on Revelation, that some Roman thinkers saw their city as having a secret name, the name of Rome spelled back-wards, forming the word AMOR, love. If this is so, Romans 5 and 8 could be more subversive again, claiming that true love is found in God’s self-giving in Christ, not in any aspect of Rome’s civic pride or imperial achievements. But even if this is irrelevant, or at best an unproveable possibility, the theme of God’s victory over the powers through his love revealed in Jesus, which forms the substance of the final paragraph of Romans 8, remains not only pastorally powerful but, in a world where crucifixions proclaimed that the power of death was the way to rule the world, politically of enormous importance. Anyone taking Romans 8:31-39 as their motto would be able to stand up to Caesar, knowing that he could only do that which tyrants normally do, while the true God had already revealed a weapon more powerful still, in the love seen on the cross and in the power seen in the resurrection.

Romans 1:18-4:25 is, of course, the classic statement of the revelation of God’s covenant faithfulness, his saving justice, in and through the death of Jesus, against the background of a world in rebellion and of the failures of God’s covenant people. By itself this does not appear to be explicitly subversive, except in the general sense that if this is how the creator God has accomplished his purpose, he has clearly upstaged the ambitions of Caesar. (We might note that in 4:13 Paul speaks almost casually about Abraham’s family ‘inheriting the world’, anticipating the conclusion of 8:18-27.) But since this is one of the passages in which 1:1-17 is spelled out more fully, and a key move on the way to Romans 8, we may say that the saving death of Jesus, for Paul, unveils not just the plan of salvation for individual sinners, but God’s overthrow of all the powers of the world. That, indeed, is why already in 3:21-31 and 4:1-25 a major emphasis is the unity of Jew and Gentile in the covenant family on the basis of the same faith, the same loyalty to God’s action in Jesus.

Romans 9-11 deals, of course, with a very specific issue, to which questions of Caesar and Rome seem at first sight irrelevant. We must not become so keen on coded meanings that we miss the main thrust of the text. However, the long argument that God has in fact done, in Christ and
through the Gentile mission, that which he promised all along in the Scriptures is in itself, as we saw, a version of that Jewish election-theology which was designed to show that Israel is the true people of the one creator God. And the story of Abraham’s two sons, and then of Isaac’s two sons, and of tracing the true lineage through the right ones in each case, could not but strike a Roman hearer as remarkably similar to the great founding stories of Rome itself, going back to Romulus and Remus.[33] Paul is telling a much older story; like Josephus, he is suggesting that Rome’s stories are upstaged by the far more antique Jewish story of origins. Thus, though his main purpose is to explain to Gentile Christians in Rome that they must not look down on Jewish non-Christians, part of that very argument, weaning them away from any latent pride in being Roman rather than Jewish, is so to tell the Jewish story, albeit then with its radical Christian modification, that the great story of Rome itself is subverted.

A final word is necessary about Romans 13 in particular. Romans 13:1-7 has of course long been regarded as the one point at which Paul nods in the direction of Caesar, and the nod appears quite respectful. This, obviously, I consider radically misleading. There are six points to be made.[34]

First, the fact that Paul needs to stress the need for civil obedience itself tells fairly strongly, if paradoxically, in favour of my overall case. It implies that, without some such restraining counsel, some might have heard his teaching to imply that the church was to become a Christian version of the Jewish ‘fourth philosophy’, owing allegiance to no one except God and therefore under obligation to rebel violently against human rulers, and to refuse to pay taxes. The paragraph can therefore be seen, not as evidence that Paul would not have been saying anything subversive, but that he had been, and now needed to make clear what this did, and particularly what it did not, imply.[35]

Second, to say that the ruler is answerable to God is itself a Jewish point over against pagan ruler-cult. Caesar did not, normally, owe allegiance to anyone except himself, and perhaps, though at a surface level, the traditional Roman gods. Paul declares, with massive Jewish tradition behind him, that Caesar is in fact responsible to the true God, whether or not he knows it. This is an undermining of pagan totalitarianism, not a reinforcement of it.

Third, the power and duty of the ruler qua ruler is emphasized in the context of the prohibition against personal vengeance at the end of the previous chapter (12:19-21). What Paul says at this point belongs on the map of one of the regular theories as to why magistracy matters: without it, everyone will take the law into their own hands. This fits closely with the following points.

Fourth, Paul’s underlying point is that the victory of the true God is not won by the normal means of revolution. Rome could cope with revolutions; she could not cope, as history demonstrated, with a community owing imitative allegiance to the crucified and risen Jesus. God did not intend that the church should be the means of causing anarchy, of refusing normal civic responsibilities; anarchy simply replaces the tyranny of the officially powerful with the tyranny of the unofficially powerful, the bullies and the rich. The real overthrow of pagan power comes by other means.

Fifth, if in Romans 9-11 Paul is concerned with Christian attitudes to non-Christian Jews, in 12-15 he is concerned with mutual relationships within the church itself. He almost certainly knew of the riots in the late 40s, impulso Chresto:[36] this kind of behaviour, he says, is to be avoided. Though the church does indeed give allegiance to another king, this allegiance must not be seen by the watching powers to result in civic disturbance, in strife between different sections of a community. God is the God of order, not chaos; the Christian response to tyranny is not anarchy but the creation of a community worshipping Jesus as Lord.

Sixth, as the succeeding passage makes clear, Paul wants the Roman Christians to live appropriately in the tension between present and future. This does not mean, as Paul’s own example bears out, that one must be politically quiescent or repressed until the final reappearling of Jesus. Preaching and living the gospel must always mean announcing and following Jesus, rather than Caesar, as the true Lord. But the eschatological balance must be kept. The church must live as a sign of the coming complete kingdom of Jesus Christ; but since that kingdom is characterized by peace, love and joy it cannot be inaugurated in the present by chaos, hatred and anger. This, I think, is what motivates Paul in Romans 13:1-7.
Conclusion

When we set Paul's gospel, not least the letter to the Romans, against the context of the widespread and increasing Caesar-cult of his day, with all that it implied, we discover a fresh perspective, a new angle on familiar passages, which informs and to an extent modifies traditional readings.

This is not to suggest in any way — to anticipate the most obvious criticism! — that the major theological or religious subject matter of Romans has been set aside or relativized. On the contrary. The critique of the powers which Paul has in mind depends precisely on a thoroughgoing and well worked out theology, not least a very high Christology and a strong doctrine of justification, and is fortified by the explicitly Christian religion from which and to which Paul writes. To show how this works out — to integrate Paul's explicit and implicit polemic against paganism in general, the powers in particular, and the Caesar-cult especially, within his wider theology and exegesis — is a long and complicated task. I hope I have shown that it is both necessary and fruitful.

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[1] What follows is a lightly revised version of my 2000 Manson Memorial Lecture, to be published in BJRL.

[2] A more general and wide-ranging treatment which shows the way these winds are blowing is Horsley and Silberman, Message. See also Elliott, Liberating.


[5] On the convergence of covenant and apocalyptic in Paul’s thought, see especially Martyn, Galatians. On the basic arguments surrounding the ‘faith of Jesus Christ’ versus ‘faith in Jesus Christ’ debate, see the interchange between Richard B. Hays and James D.G. Dunn in Johnson and Hay (eds.), Pauline Theology.


[7] For the direct impact of this on Corinth around the time of Paul’s establishment of the church there, cf. Winter, After Paul, ch. 12.


[10] More details on all of the following may be found in my forthcoming commentary on Romans, NIB 10.


[13] I gratefully acknowledge the work of Dr Peter Oakes of Manchester University, whose studies of Philippians first alerted me to this whole theme, though he should not be held responsible for the larger picture I am trying to draw, with all its dangers and loose ends. See Oakes, Philippians.
See Wright, ‘Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire’. I do not see Paul’s occasional exploitation of his own Roman citizenship in Acts as in fundamental conflict with this position.


See, e.g., Georgi, Theocracy; Koester, ‘Imperial Ideology’

See Winter, After Paul. On the imperial cult in Corinth see Chow, Patronage. See also Horsley, Rhetoric. It may be that we should explore further in this respect the conflict between the gospel and the powers in 1 Cor. 2, the reign and victory of Christ in 1 Cor. 15, and other themes as well (a point made to me in conversation by Dr Andrew Goddard).


As Horsley (‘Introduction’, in Paul and Empire, 3) puts it: ‘Since so little attention has been devoted to the Roman imperial context of Paul’s mission and his relations to it, we are only at the point of attempting to formulate appropriate questions and provisional research strategies.’ On my own wider proposals see Climax and also What St Paul Really Said.

See New Testament, Part II, chs. 3-5; and Jesus.

See, e.g., Hengel, Crucifixion.

Rom. 2:1-16; 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:9-10.

See again Rom. 2:7, 10, 26-29; 8:1-17.

See Mart. Pol., 8-12.


Cf. 1 Cor. 15:20-28.

On continuing subversive themes within Jewish mystical literature see Alexander, ‘Family’.

We should not overlook, in this context, the remarkable promises that God’s people in Christ will ‘reign’ (basileuein) (5:17). To be sure, the main contrast here is with the reign of death; but any hint at a basileus other than Caesar is fighting talk in the Roman Empire, as Luke knew well (Acts 17:7).

Aune, Revelation, 926—27.


On coded political polemic within first-century theological writing see esp. Goodenough, Politics.

On the connection between Esau and Rome see, e.g., Hengel, Die Zeloten, 309; Feldman, Jew and Gentile, 493.

It is sadly impossible to enter here into debate with the many scholars, including some in this book, who have written importantly on this passage. A fuller statement of my present position is found in the NIB commentary.

I owe this point to Dr David Wenham, in conversation.
Read the Book of Romans online. Scripture chapters verses with full summary, commentary meaning, and concordances for Bible study. This summary of the book of Romans provides information about the title, author(s), date of writing, chronology, theme, theology, outline, a brief overview, and the chapters of the Book of Romans. Author. The writer of this letter was the apostle Paul (see 1:1 and note). No voice from the early church was ever raised against his authorship. The letter contains a number of historical references that agree with known facts of Paul's life. The doctrinal content of the book is typical of Paul, which is evident from a comparison with other letters he wrote. Date and Place of Writing. The book Romans 1:1-32\textsuperscript{1} Read the Bible online or download free. The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures is published by Jehovah\textsuperscript{2}'s Witnesses.\textsuperscript{2} 1 Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus and called to be an apostle, set apart for God\textsuperscript{2}'s good news,\textsuperscript{2} which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures,\textsuperscript{2} concerning his Son, who came to be from the offspring of David according to the flesh,\textsuperscript{2} but who with power was declared God\textsuperscript{2}'s Son according to the spirit. The Epistle to the Romans or Letter to the Romans, often shortened to Romans, is the sixth book in the New Testament. Biblical scholars agree that it was composed by Paul the Apostle to explain that salvation is offered through the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the longest of the Pauline epistles. In the opinion of Jesuit scholar Joseph Fitzmyer, the book "overwhelms the reader by the density and sublimity of the topic with which it deals, the gospel of the justification and salvation of Jew and Greek