

DRAFT: NOT FOR CITATION

## **Reconciliation and the Blood of the Cross: Forgiveness and Subversive Politics in Paul**

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Paul's political ethic is often assumed to have been summarized in Romans 13.1-7. This text has, furthermore, been read in such a way as to legitimate the state in all circumstances, and frequently in circumstances of oppression. This paper will discuss Romans 13.1-7 in the larger context of Romans 12, and chapter 13.8-14, in order to demonstrate how these surrounding verses provide a political ethic for the Roman community that undermines the political authority of Rome, and the violent political ethic that is practised by Rome. In addition, we shall also briefly discuss Colossians 1.15-20 as an example of a similarly subversive challenge to the "peace through violence" that characterized the Pax Romana. The current implications of this argument for Christian life in the context of the Pax Americana are, of course, not far from my sights.

### **The Context of Empire**

The interpretation of Romans 13.1-7 has had some urgency a number of times during the last century. Under the rule of Hitler this passage was used as a reason for allegiance to the Nazi regime, with Bonhoeffer and the Barmen Declaration providing perhaps the most well-known challenge to this reading. Similarly, under the apartheid regime in South Africa, Allan Boesak describes how Romans 13 was used as a stick to demand his obedience to the state.<sup>1</sup> The Vietnam War provided a context where again the importance of obedience to the state à la Romans 13 was asserted, in the face of growing civil disobedience. And now, of course, as the United States marches further and further down the path of imperial violence, these verses are appealed to once again.

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<sup>1</sup>Allan A. Boesak "What Belongs to Caesar: Once Again Romans 13" in *When Prayer Makes News* ed. Allan A. Boesak and Charles Villa-Vicencio (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 138.

Discussions of Romans 13 in the context of the community to which Paul addressed the letter often highlight a context of political quietism. So, most commonly, the primary issue is considered to be a possible tax revolt, and, as the argument goes, the christian community in Rome is encouraged not to participate in such resistance to imperial rule.

The larger context of Romans, however, indicates that the dominant experience of the Roman christian community was one of persecution at the hands of Roman authorities. Such persecution frames the discussion of suffering in Romans 8, with its references to ‘oppression (*thlipsis*), distress, persecution (*di\_gmos*), peril and sword (*machaira*)’ (v. 35), as well as to ‘death, rulers and powers’ (v. 38). This suggests that the suffering that Paul is referring to had something to do with the rulers who had the power to wield the sword in Rome, and who have already introduced oppression, distress, persecution, peril and sword into the Jewish community there.<sup>2</sup> This evidence from Romans 8 is augmented by the language of our passage, where the call

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<sup>2</sup>Ernst Käsemann (*Commentary on Romans*, Geoffrey Bromiley, trans. and ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 249) also suggests that *machaira* perhaps means concretely execution'. Dunn (Romans, 505) points out that *di\_gmos* always refers to persecution for religious reasons. While it is not at all clear that all of the Jews were expelled from Rome in 49 AD, the fact still remains that the Jews were the subject of an edict at that time, and hence the target of the imperial authorities. For recent discussions which question the historical plausibility of a wholesale expulsion of the Jews from Rome see Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 372-389; and Steve Mason "'For I am not ashamed of the Gospel" (Rom. 1.16): The Gospel and the First Readers of Rome', in Jervis and Richardson, eds., *Gospel in Paul*, 255-276.

Further evidence can be adduced. Like those who protest the injustice of empire in the psalms, Paul portrays christian believers as those who cry 'Abba, Father' (Romans 8:15). In the story of Israel, this cry to God as father is a cry for redemption out of suffering. The Greek word that Paul uses for this cry, *kradzein*, is the word that is overwhelmingly found in psalms of lament to describe those crying out to God in the midst of their oppression. Most notably, it occurs in a number of those psalms that are explicitly quoted by Paul in Romans. (Pss 18:6,41 (17:7,42 LXX); 32:3 (31:3 LXX); 69:3 (68:4 LXX). See also Pss 4:3; 17:6; 22:5; 28:1-2; 31:22; 55:16; 61:2 (60:3 LXX); 88:1,9,13.)

Similarly, the groans of those living in the shadow of empire are reflected in Romans 8 in the groaning of creation (v. 22), believers (v. 23), and God's very Spirit (v.26). This language of groaning originated in Israel's first experience of empire, and was repeatedly used when Israel found herself suffering under imperial control during her history. See e.g. Exod 2:23-24; Judg 2:18; Pss 31:10; 38:9-10; Isa 24:7; 30:15; Lam 1:18,21-22; Ezek

to "Bless those who persecute you" (Romans 12.14) also suggests that persecution is being faced by this community.

This imperial context heightens the question of *dikaiosune*, the righteousness or justice of God. Is God *just* if God's people are suffering at the hands of an imperial power?<sup>3</sup> This was, of course, the central question of the lament psalms, many of which Paul quotes and alludes to throughout Romans.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Paul's programmatic statement in Romans 1.16-17 is a direct challenge to the empire: the central terms Paul uses here, the gospel (*euaggelion*), salvation (*soterion*), faithfulness (*pistis*) and righteousness, or justice (*dikaiosune*), are all terms weighted with symbolic and mythic import in the empire. In the face of the imperial assertion that Caesar was the one who brought "good news", the gospel, Paul does not shrink from proclaiming, "I am not ashamed of the gospel".<sup>5</sup> Moreover, to the Romans, at the heart of an empire that lauded "*fides*" (the latin equivalent of the Greek *pistis*, faith or faithfulness) as an appropriate response

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21:11-12; 1 Macc 1:26; 3 Macc 1:18. Further on the background for the language of groaning in Israel's scriptures see Sylvia Keesmaat, *Paul and His Story:(Re)Interpreting the Exodus Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 107-110.

In addition, the context for the intercession of the Spirit in Romans 8.26-27 is described thus by Paul: 'The Spirit helps us in our persecutions' (v.26). As Michael Barré has convincingly argued, based on the Septuagint and intertestamental usage, Paul uses *t\_ astheneia* to refer to persecutions, which are interpreted as being part of the eschatological ordeal, ('Paul as "Eschatologic Person": A New Look at 2 Cor 11:29', *CBQ* 37 (1975), 510-512; Keesmaat, *Paul and His Story*, 120-122).

<sup>3</sup>Within Israel's scriptures the question of theodicy is overwhelmingly concerned with why idolatrous pagans who practice injustice appear to be triumphant. I would like to suggest that this true for Romans as well.

<sup>4</sup>See Sylvia C. Keesmaat "The Psalms in Romans and Galatians" in Steve Moyise and J. Maarten Menkes, eds., *The Psalms in the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 139-161.

<sup>5</sup>On the imperial overtones of the language of gospel see: Elliott, "Paul and the Politics of Empire" in Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics*, 24; Georgi, *Theocracy*, 83; Wright, "Gospel and Theology in Galatians", in L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson, ed., *Gospel in Paul: Studies in Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 226-228.

to the salvation of Caesar, Paul asserts in Romans 1.16 that this gospel is the power of salvation to everyone who has faith.<sup>6</sup> Paul's letter begins by deliberately weaving together the central terms of the empire and replacing them with the story of salvation by a different gospel, another faithfulness and a different justice.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than engage in a detailed exegesis of Romans 12 and 13, for which there is little time in this session, I will outline in broad strokes my basis for reading all of chapter 12 and 13 as a political ethic.

### **1. Paul is engaged in an apocalyptic challenge to the "new age" of the empire**

The whole of this passage is framed by an apocalyptic context.<sup>8</sup> Paul calls the community in Rome not to be conformed to this age (12.2), language that recalls the apocalyptic ordering of this world into this age, with all of its moral corruption and political oppression, and the age to come, when God's kingdom will once again ensure healing, food, and peace for all God's people. Romans 13 ends with the assurance that the new age is dawning, contrasting the night that is far gone with the day that is at hand (13.12) thereby evoking the texts both of promise and judgement concerning the day of the Lord. Such texts served in times of political oppression to

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<sup>6</sup>On *fides* as a virtue of the empire, Dieter Georgi refers to the Acts of Augustus, chapters 31-33 in "God turned Upside Down", 149; see also Richard A. Horsley, "Patronage, Priesthood and Power: Introduction" in Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire*, 93.

<sup>7</sup>For more detail on the imperial context of Romans see Dieter Georgi, *Theocracy in Paul's Praxis and Theology*, translated by David E. Green (Fortress: Minneapolis, 1991); Michael Joseph Brown, "Paul's Use of *DOULOOS CHRISTOU IESOU* in Romans 1.1", *JBL* 120/4 (2001) 723-737; N.T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans*, The New Interpreter's Bible Volume X (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), esp. pp. 404-405; 423-424, 738; Neil Elliott *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation: Essays in Honour of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000); and, for more general background, Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997).

<sup>8</sup>So also N.T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans*. The New Interpreter's Bible. vol X. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 701.

remind God's people that, contrary to all appearances, God is the one who ultimately reigns; God is the one who controls the story of the nations. This framing, therefore, sets the passage in a context where the power of Rome is already undermined. As we shall see, such a subversion becomes more prominent in 13.1.

In addition, the reference to "this age" also evokes the "new age" that Augustus has inaugurated many years before, and which was undergoing a revival at the time of Nero.<sup>9</sup> "No less than in Augustus' day, the 'gospel' of the emperor's accession proclaimed the restoration of a 'golden age,' not only for the Roman people but for all peoples fortunate enough to be brought beneath the benevolent wings of empire."<sup>10</sup> Paul begins this section, then, with a clear allusion to God's control over history, and with a call to the community in Rome to reject the new age of the empire and all that it stands for.

## **2. Paul argues for a transformed body politic**

The whole of this passage is also framed by the controlling metaphor of "the body". Just as *euaggelion* was freighted with imperial meaning, so also was *soma* employed as a term to refer to the body politic of the empire.<sup>11</sup> But Paul's language is, again, a challenge to the Roman body politic. While the body over which Caesar is head (*kephale*) functions only if all the members inhabit their correct sphere in the hierarchy of imperial order, Paul describes the Roman christian community as the body of Christ, which functions only if its members share the gifts that God

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<sup>9</sup>On the new age inaugurated by Augustus see Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), ch. 5.

<sup>10</sup>Neil Elliott, "Paul and the Politics of Empire" in *Paul and Politics*, 37.

<sup>11</sup>Richard A. Horsley, *I Corinthians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 171, lists the following sources for the analogy between the body and the city-state: Marcus Aurelius, *Med.* 2.1; 7.13; Epictetus, *Diss.* 2.10.3-4; Seneca, *Ep.* 95.52; Livy, *Hist.* 2.32. In the last instance, the fable of the body was used by the senators to try to make the plebeians repent of their plans of mutiny. It thus functioned as a means of ensuring that the ruled classes continued to fulfil their civic duties to the state. Wright, *Romans*, 710, also lists Plato *Republic* 462c-d; Plutarch *Arat.* 24.5; *Cor* 6.2-4.

has given them.<sup>12</sup> These gifts have nothing to do, however, with wealth or social standing, and everything to do with prophecy, service, teaching, liberal giving, assistance, and acts of mercy.<sup>13</sup>

In a body politic, moreover, where one was to make sacrifices to the emperor, and be willing to sacrifice one's body to the needs of the state, Paul calls for the Roman Christians to present their bodies as a holy and acceptable sacrifice to God, their "reasonable worship" (*logiken latreian*).<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, as Katherine Grieb points out, this is a "military metaphor of putting the members of one's body at the disposal of one's lord", a metaphor, moreover, which Paul uses at length in his description of the baptized in Romans 6.12-23.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, this is the cultic language of sacrifice. In both instances, the political overtones are clear for the Roman community. No longer do they make sacrifice to the empire, no longer do they consider themselves part of a body politic for which they would sacrifice their very selves. No, they are one body in Christ, and are to put on *the* Lord, Jesus the Messiah (13.14). So the passage ends by highlighting the name of the Lord they worship, not Caesar, but Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

### **3. Paul undermines the basis of imperial power: the honour system**

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<sup>12</sup>See Halvor Moxnes, "The Quest for Honor and the Unity of the Community in Romans 12 and in the Orations of Dio Chrysostom" in Troels Engberg-Pederson, ed., *Paul in His Hellenistic Context* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 225.

<sup>13</sup>Paul engages in a similar contrast in 1 Corinthians 11.17-12.31, where he describes their practice of Lord's supper in terms of the feasts of the associations of the empire, and then calls the community to discern the body of Christ of which they are a part, a body he describes in chapter 12 in terms of the various gifts.

<sup>14</sup>On the contrast between the "reasonable worship" that Paul mentions here, and debauchery and excess of the Roman worship, which Paul criticises in Rom 1.18-32, see Elliott, "Paul and the Politics of Empire", 39.

<sup>15</sup>Grieb, 118.

<sup>16</sup>On the political nature of the term *christianoī*, which was applied to followers of Jesus (eg. in Acts 11.26) see Bruce Winter, "Roman Law and Society in Romans 12-15" in *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church*, ed., Peter Oakes (Carlisle: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 70-74.

Paul calls this community to reject the honour/shame dynamics which drive both the patron/client system and the pattern of civic benefaction in the empire. The patron-client relationship, with its dynamic of the promise of benefit from the patron in exchange for the honour and praise of the clients functioned as a powerful means of social cohesion and control. This same dynamic operated on the level of the society as a whole: the emperor was the ultimate patron, bestowing his benefits on those who honoured him.<sup>17</sup> Subverting the complex system of relations based on status and honour that formed the building blocks for the patron/client relationship, Paul counsels each member of the community not to think of themselves more highly than they ought. Moreover, they are to love one another with brotherly affection and to outdo one another in showing honour (*time*) (12.10). And to make sure that they grasp how counter-imperial this community is to be, he adds "Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly" (12.16). "It appears that Paul's exhortation 'not to think too highly' is directed not to an individual character trait, but to a total system of relations between individuals of unequal status."<sup>18</sup> Throughout these verses the contrast between the empire of Rome, built upon honour and privilege, and the kingdom of the messiah, which raises up the lowly and is built upon service is unmistakable. This is the contrast that is operative throughout these verses.<sup>19</sup>

#### **4. Paul undermines the violent ethic of the empire with a call to bless the enemy**

Paul describes the shape of this new body politic in 12.15-21 in ways that thoroughly undermine the description of the Roman state in Romans 13.1-7. Through a series of exhortations Paul

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<sup>17</sup>On the patronage system see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, ed., *Patronage in Ancient Society* (New York: Routledge, 1989); on Caesar as the highest patron see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "Patronage in Roman Society" in *Patronage in Ancient Society*, p. 84..

<sup>18</sup>Moxnes, 222. In this article, Moxnes thoroughly explores the context of *hybris* in a Greek and Hellenistic philosophy and literature.

<sup>19</sup>As Bruce Winter puts it, "Paul thereby overthrew centuries of Roman self-definition based on class with this counter-cultural self-evaluation based on God-given gifts that were meant to benefit others or contribute to their needs." (p.79).

contrasts the behaviour of this body of Christ not only with Roman society but also with the traditional hopes of Israel. This latter is evident in 12.14 where Paul says "bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."

As I have recently argued elsewhere, Paul quotes and echoes many psalms of lament throughout Romans, psalms which call for the violent overthrow of God's enemies as evidence of God's justice and faithfulness to God's people.<sup>20</sup> Rather than reinforcing the call of these psalms, in Romans 8 Paul describes a community modelled on a different kind of messiah, who by suffering death is more than a conqueror, and who calls the community to a similar ethic (Romans 8 ; see also Romans 15.3). In Romans 12.14 we see a call to be a community, therefore, which rejects a "justice" achieved by the might of the sword and the defeat of enemies, and subversively seeks blessing even for those who are the perpetrators of oppression. Roman justice is turned on its head.

Some have argued that Paul's language a few verses later suggests that a violent vengeance may in fact be due to enemies: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but give place to the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" and then Paul continues: "No, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.'" (vv.19-20). Let us look more closely at these verses in their context.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Keesmaat, "The Psalms in Romans and Galatians" in *The Psalms in the New Testament*.

<sup>21</sup>Space does not permit a complete exegesis of the latter part of verse 20. However, Marva Dawn in *Truly the Community: Romans 12 and How to be the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, 283) appeals to the Egyptian provenance of these verses as a way of clarifying the meaning of "for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head". Apparently bearing hot coals on one's head was a symbol of repentance; hence kindness of the enemy could be a way to bring the enemy to repentance. As we shall see below, this coheres well with a possible allusion to 2 Kings 6 in these verses. However, cf. Gordon Zerbe, "Paul's Ethic of Nonretaliation and Peace" in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation* ed. Willard M. Swartley (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 196.

In the first instance, the Old Testament background of these verses is illuminating. Verse 20 follows quite closely Proverbs 25.21&22: "If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you." Interestingly enough, a few verses earlier we find this exhortation: "With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue can break bones." (v. 15), and a few verses later we find this: "It is not good to eat much honey, or to seek honour on top of honour (*timan de chre logous endoxous*)" (v.27). These thematic echoes with Romans 12.10&21, suggest that the whole of this pericope was whispering around the edges of Paul's thought. And the soft tongue and patience of Proverbs 25.15 demonstrates in an explicitly political context the same kind of non-violent ethic that Paul is advocating in Romans 12.

A second possible Old Testament referent for this passage is the story of Elisha and the Aramean army in 2 Kings 6.8-23.<sup>22</sup> You recall the story: after God has struck the Aramean army blind, Elisha leads them inside Samaria. When the Lord opens their eyes the king of Israel says to Elisha, "Father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?" Elisha answers in this way, "No! did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master." So he prepared for them a great feast; after that they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master." Now, a few things are notable about this story. First of all, not only could this army be considered an enemy to Elisha personally--after all, the only reason they were in Israel was to capture Elisha at the command of their king--but they were also political enemies of Israel. Elisha was eagerly sought because he kept betraying the location of the Aramean army to the Israelites so that they wouldn't be attacked. Here food and drink are given to enemies in a decidedly political context. And the result is

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<sup>22</sup>See A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defence of God's Righteousness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 122.

political as well, for "the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel" (v. 23). The result of such actions is peace. Peace without the blood of the sword.

But the other startling thing about this passage is Elisha's response to the king who wants to kill the soldiers. Elisha says "Did you capture with your sword and bow those whom you want to kill?" The answer of course, is "no, God captured them". And the implication is that God is the one who will now kill these enemies. Contrary to expectation, however, God, after restoring their sight, does not kill them. Instead the man of God prepares a great feast, sets before them food and drink, and sends them home. The implications are clear: while the impulse of the king of Israel is to destroy the enemy, God's way is to provide food and drink. And it is God's way that brings peace.

If this story is read as a background to Romans 12.19-20 then the political overtones become clear. In addition, the vengeance of God is revealed to be deeply subversive of any violent retaliation, for God's vengeance does not mirror the violence of the empire.

### **6. Paul rejects the imperial path of peace through conquest**

Throughout Romans, Paul offers an *euaggelion* of peace, not through imperial conquest, but through messianic suffering. This comes to its most eloquent expression in Romans 8, where God's response to the suffering community is not revenge on their enemies, but rather a relentless solidarity in their suffering in the groaning of the Spirit (8.26) and in the death of the son (8.32). Moreover, in Romans 8.37 this solidarity results in the community being more than conquerors (v.37).<sup>23</sup> The whole dynamic of this passage rejects the traditional categories about who is victim and who is conquered. The messiah who died and was raised is the one in the position of authority at the right hand of God, and those who suffer are the ones who are -- not conquered -- but more than, indeed above, the conquerors. Paul is rejecting the imperial categories here of

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<sup>23</sup>The rest of this paragraph is dependent upon my article Keesmaat, "The Psalms in Romans and Galatians," pp.151-152.

victory, categories beloved by both Israel and Rome, and is replacing them with the category of suffering love. The way to respond to the violence of the empire is to bear it; and in that bearing to reveal that one is part of the family of Jesus (Rom 8.17,29) and therefore one of those who cannot be separated from God's love. It is such love, such 'relentless solidarity', that enables the Roman Christians to bear the suffering that they experience at the hands of their persecutors.<sup>24</sup>

In this light it is not surprising that the way the Christian community in Rome is to "live peaceably with all (v.18) is by repaying "no one evil for evil" (v. 17). Then the community will "not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good" (v.21), and peace will be the result. Again, Paul subverts the language of the conqueror by robbing it of its violent force. The resulting peace, of course, is considered the primary achievement of the Roman empire, the Pax Romana considered to be one of her great successes. Rome's peace, however, was achieved by the violent oppression of her enemies and the brutal suppression of those who resisted her rule. Throughout Romans Paul has demonstrated another route to peace; and in two of those places such peace is linked with suffering (Rom 5.1-5; 12.14-18). The contrast between how the body of Christ achieves peace, and how the body politic of Rome achieves peace is heightened further in Romans 13.1-7.

### **7. Paul denies the divine authority of Rome**

It is striking that the vocabulary of Romans 13.1 (Let every person be subject [*hypotassestho*] to the governing authorities) echoes that of Colossians 3.18 (Wives, be subject [*hypotassessthe*] to your husbands) and Ephesians 5.21 (Be subject [*hypotassomenoi*] to one another). Both of these passages in Colossians and Ephesians can be shown to have elements which undermine the authoritarian patriarchal structures which formed the backbone of the social structure in ancient Roman society.<sup>25</sup> This passage contains a similar dynamic. Paul's call to subjection first of all

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<sup>24</sup>The importance of the "relentless solidarity" of God in transforming the darkness is discussed in Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 12.

<sup>25</sup>On Colossians see Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat *Colossian Remixed: Subverting the*

suggests the need to submit to one's place in an existing hierarchy.<sup>26</sup> Second, as the passage continues, it becomes clear that such subjection is very ambiguous. The very next sentence echoes a recurrent OT theme, that the governing authorities have their power only as a result of God. Even in times of oppression such assertions are a way of insisting that although it appears that the (often evil) empire has control, it is really God who is sovereign, who really has power (eg. Dan 2.21). As a result, "Romans 13 constitutes a severe demotion of arrogant and self-divinizing rulers. It is an undermining of totalitarianism, not a reinforcement of it."<sup>27</sup>

Luise Schottroff illuminatingly puts this passage in the context of loyalty tests demanded by the empire. Even though Christians would assert their loyalty to the empire, this does not mean that they were willing to worship the imperial gods, or bow the knee to Caesar.<sup>28</sup> She points out that:

In the case of conflict . . . Romans 13.1-7 was insufficient in the eyes of the Roman authorities, because at that point a positive recognition of the Roman gods was demanded. If one considers the context of the Roman policy of religion, Romans 13.1-7 loses its apparently singular character and becomes a link in the long chain of declarations of loyalty of subjugated peoples toward Rome.<sup>29</sup>

Like the "hidden transcript" of the little people which says what the public transcript wants to

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*Empire* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2004), ch 11. .

<sup>26</sup>According to Wright, *Romans*, 720, "The word has echoes of military formation: one must take one's place in the appropriate rank."

<sup>27</sup>Wright, *Romans*, 719.

<sup>28</sup>Luise Schottroff, "'Give to Caesar What Belongs to Caesar and to God What Belong to God': A Theological Response of the Early Christian Church to its Social and Political Environment" in Willard M. Swartley, ed., *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 228-229.

<sup>29</sup>Schottroff, 229.

hear, Paul seems to be advocating subjection to Rome in this passage.<sup>30</sup> However, in rooting Rome's authority in the higher authority of God, he undermines the authority of the empire at the very outset. In Jewett's terms, "the sacred canopy of the Roman gods has been replaced".<sup>31</sup> Or, in the vernacular, the emperor has no clothes.

### **8. Paul contrasts the body politic of Jesus with the Roman state defined by wrath and the sword**

That this passage has only the appearance of subjection is further reinforced by the way that the state is described (and I am here drawing on the work of Neil Elliott and Robert Jewett). Paul is writing these words in the midst of an empire that prides itself on bringing peace, especially under the rule of an emperor, Nero, who took pride in the fact that he had not won his empire by the sword. Indeed under Nero, the sword was to become "a quaint relic of bygone days"<sup>32</sup> In the face of such imperial propaganda, Paul's words in Rom 13.1-7 "betray a sobering caution. The imperial sword is *not* idle: it continues to threaten destruction and bloodshed."<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, this is a rule that demands "fear" (12.3,4), and which is described as executing wrath (13.4) by means of the sword. As Elliott points out, the imperial powers linked persuasion and force as the twin agents of consent.<sup>34</sup> In addition, Jews such as Philo were adept at seeming to give lip service to the honour due to rulers, but did so in a way which betrayed their real

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<sup>30</sup>On hidden and public transcripts see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>31</sup>Jewett, 65.

<sup>32</sup>Elliott, "Romans 13.1-7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda", 203. Elliott quotes a number of sources which demonstrate this point: Calpurnius Siculus, *Eclogue* 1.45-65; Einsiedeln *Eclogues* 25-31 (both taken from J. Wright and Arnold M Duff, eds., *Minor Latin Poets*, LCC [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954]); and Seneca *De Clementia* 1.2-4; 11.3; 13.5.

<sup>33</sup>Elliott, "Romans 13.1-7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda", 203

<sup>34</sup>Elliott, "Romans 13.1-7", 198.

allegiance. Elliott describes a passage in which Philo describes how the Jews in the Alexandrian marketplace "quickly make way 'for the ruler, and for beasts beneath the yoke.'" Elliott continues, "Of course, Philo protests that the motive is different 'With rulers, we act out of respect [*time*]; to beasts beneath the yoke, we act on account of fear [*phobon*], so we suffer no serious injury from them."<sup>35</sup>

E.R. Goodenough describes the Philo passage in this way:

The sarcasm at the end is clear. Philo has compared harsh rulers to savage and deadly animals throughout. When he mentions how in the marketplace the Jews have to make place for their rulers and the pack animal alike, it is part of the very caution he is counselling that he should distinguish between the two, once the rulers in Alexandria have been distinctly referred to, and say that one gives way out of honor to the rulers, but out of fear to the beasts . . . But his Jewish readers would quite well have understood that the reason Philo gave way to each was the same, because he knew that if he did not he would be crushed.<sup>36</sup>

In a similar way, while Paul appears to be paying lip service to the goodness of the Roman state, the vocabulary he uses, and the context in which his discussion occurs, heightens the difference between the body that he is describing in Romans 12, and the body politic that he describes in chapter 13. One is characterized by love, hospitality to stranger, blessing of persecutors, peace and the rejection of vengeance; the other is to be obeyed out of fear of the sword.

### **9. Paul again calls the community of Jesus to love, even to love Rome**

This difference is heightened by the contrast between vv. 7 and 8: "Pay to all what is owed them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, tolls to whom tolls are owed, fear to whom fear is owed, and

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<sup>35</sup>Elliott, "Romans 13.1-7", 200.

<sup>36</sup>E.R. Goodenough, *An Introduction to Philo Judeaus*, 57; quoted in Elliott, "Romans 13.1-7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda", 200-201.

honour to whom honour is owed. Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves one another has fulfilled the law." On the one hand Paul tells the community to fulfil their obligations, on the other, he makes it clear that the only real obligation is to love one another. In the face of a state that demanded as its right taxes, tolls, fear and honour, Paul has been describing a community where the only law is love.<sup>37</sup>

The radical character of this verse should not be lost: whether or not taxes, tolls, fear and honour are owed to Rome (and fear clearly is, according to Paul), what the community owes to Rome, precisely because this community has put on a different Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ (13.14), is love. And so even though the call to "bless your persecutors" is not preceded by the call to "love your enemies" as it is in the gospels, that is, in the end, where Paul ends up. Such a call has deep roots in Judaism, of course, as far back as Jeremiah's letter to the exiles to "seek the welfare of the city" in the heart of imperial Babylon. (Jer 29.7).

Before drawing out the implications of this reading, let us look briefly at Colossians 1.15-20, a passage where many of the same themes are found.

### **Colossians 1.15-20: A Challenge to Roman Authority**

Like most cities in Asia Minor in the first century, Colossae was a city shaped by Roman imperialism.<sup>38</sup> In such a context, Paul's brief poem in Colossians 1.15-20 gains unexpected

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<sup>37</sup>As Jewett points out: "That the roman authorities were ordained by the God and Father of Jesus Christ turns the entire Roman civic cult on its head, exposing its suppression of the truth. Its involvement in the martyrdom of Christ, crucified under Pontius Pilate, cannot have been forgotten by the readers of chapter 13 who knew from firsthand experience the hollowness of Rome's claim to have established a benign rule of law. The critique of the law in all its forms in the first eight chapters of this letter cannot have been forgotten, which explains why the proudest institution of the Pax Romana, the rule of law, goes unmentioned here. Nothing remains of the claim in Roman propaganda that its law enforcement system was redemptive, producing a kind of messianic peace under the rule of the gods "Justitia" and "Clementia". Christ alone is the fulfilment of the law (10.4), not the emperor or the Roman gods. . . Submission to the governmental authorities is therefore an expression of respect not for the authorities themselves, but for the crucified deity who stands behind them." (p. 67).

<sup>38</sup>On the imperial setting of Colossians see Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians*

overtones.<sup>39</sup> We see in this passage some of the same dynamics that we saw in Romans 13, without the attempt to pay lip service to Rome. In an empire saturated with images of the emperor, who mediated the blessing of the gods to the people, Paul proclaims that Jesus is the image of the invisible God.<sup>40</sup> Paul poetically evokes a counter-image of one who is not merely the son of a divine father, but the firstborn of all creation.

That is already rhetorically subversive, but Paul ups the ante. He continues: this image is the one in whom and for whom all thrones and dominions and rulers and powers were made (v.16). In the Roman Empire thrones and dominions and rulers and powers referred to Rome, to her ruler, Caesar, on the throne established by the gods, to his dominion over all of the known world, to his military power and might. In a few short words Paul undermines the whole mythic structure of the empire: its ruler, its throne, its dominion, its power. All of these things were created by and for Jesus. And then he uses some of the pet imagery of the empire itself: Jesus, he says, is the head of the body. Again, the body image of Romans 12 provides the guiding metaphor for Paul's assertion here. Jesus is the head of something that replaces the empire, the *ekklesia*, a new body politic that replaces the *ekklesia* of the empire.

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*Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), chapter 3.

<sup>39</sup>On the Pauline authorship of Colossians see Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*. Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 44. (Waco: Word Books, 1982), xli-xlix; N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*. Tyndale Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1986), 31-34; Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*. Rev. Ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986/1999), 393-395.

<sup>40</sup>The word *eikon* was used to describe statues, busts and paintings of Caesar in the square or other public places. See S.R.F. Price *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 177. Paul Zanker sums up the ubiquitous character of imperial images well: "Soon political symbolism could be seen on every imaginable object made for private use, indeed on virtually everything that could be decorated at all: jewellery and utensils, furniture, textiles, walls and stuccoed ceilings, door jambs, clay facings, roof tiles, and even on tomb monuments and marble ash urns." *The Power of Images in The Age of Augustus*, translated by Alan Shapiro (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1988), p. 166.

Like the empire, Colossians 1.15-20 makes totality claims but it makes these claims in the name of a ruler who subverts violence itself. The climax of this poem is the claim that Jesus makes peace through the blood of his cross (1.20). The linking of peace, bloodshed and crosses is nothing new for Rome. That is how Rome made peace too, by the blood of the cross. But Rome's way was to use the cross as a violent means of oppressive control to maintain the "peace", the *pax Romana*, for which it was famous. As we saw, it was no secret that the peace of Rome was rooted in military might.<sup>41</sup> Peace through violence was the method of the empire. But this poem proclaims a peace brought not by military might, economic oppression, and cultural domination but by the bearing of violence. This is hardly violent hegemony. This is the reconciliation of all things, even the things that wound us, by a self-sacrificing love. Paul continues to strengthen this point by emphasizing that it is the bodily death of Jesus which results in reconciling forgiveness for those estranged, hostile and doing evil. Violence itself is reconciled in the death of this saviour; and in such a reconciliation, the practitioners of violence are made holy, blameless and irreproachable. In short, they are welcomed into the community which the letter addresses as "the holy ones . . . in Colossae."

Later, Paul alludes to the imperial practice of humiliating captives in victory marches: "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it" (Col 2.15). The context makes clear that the disarming of rulers and authorities happened on the cross, that they were made a public example on the cross, that this triumph was on the cross. Not only is Paul turning imperial metaphors on their head - a cross as the site of the

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<sup>41</sup>The imagery is telling: coins commemorating Roman rule had the goddess Pax on one side and a sword or an image of Augustus with a pile of weapons on the other; the *ars pacis*, the altar of peace, was adorned with scenes of peaceful prosperity on one side and "Roma is depicted enthroned on a mound of armour on the other." Paul Zanker comments that "the viewer was meant to read the two images together and understand the message, that the blessings of peace had been won and made secure by the newly fortified *virtus* of Roman arms." Zanker, *Power of Images*, 175. For other examples on coins and sculpture see Klaus Wengst *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, translated by John Bowden (London: SCM, 1987), pp. 11-13.

victory march of the victim - he is also saying that in this death there is life, in the imperial exclusion of Jesus there is embrace.<sup>42</sup>

What we see in Colossians 2.15 is a victory through forgiveness. Paul prefaces this verse by talking of God's forgiveness for the Colossians, a forgiveness brought about on the cross. This same act of forgiveness is what enables embrace of the enemy rather than exclusion.

### **Conclusion: A New Political Ethic**

This brief sketch has demonstrated that Paul is calling a new body politic into being, a new people whose overt love, blessing and care for the enemy and persecutor functions as a political challenge to an empire that knows only how to rule by wrath, sword and bloodshed. On the surface such a political ethic seems to be simplistic. In fact, to someone like myself whose response to imperial violence has been profoundly shaped by the stories of my grandparents and their involvement in the Dutch resistance in WWII, such a political ethic seems dangerously naive. And indeed, that is how the community where I have my roots treats such discussions. But I can do no more than bear witness to what Paul calls "the foolishness of the cross". The political ethic that Paul describes here points us to a practice that could have transformative effect. As Marva Dawn pointedly puts it:

What would happen in Third-World countries, for example, if instead of selling militants more arms or putting embargoes on their trade we worked to bring about economic justice? What would happen if we put food on their tables, taught them skills that gave them dignity, and freed them from their fears by caring about them without violence? . . . What would happen if we strengthened the economies of Third-World nations instead of threatening them militarily?<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Miroslav Volf describes it in this way: "Instead of aping the enemy's act of violence and rejection, Christ, the victim who refuses to be defined by the perpetrator, forgives and makes space in himself for the enemy." *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 126.

<sup>43</sup>Marva Dawn, *Truly the Community*, 269, 284.

But these questions only explore one dimension of Paul's call to be a political people who act without violence. For while our obvious enemies may be those nations who appear to hate the western world, Romans 12 and 13 had a more immediate referent for the Roman Christian community --the Roman empire in which they lived. The more immediate parallel for us is the question of how we live under a state that practices the same violence as Rome, a state that, as a result appears to be our enemy. What would it look like not only for us to pressure our governments to pay our debt of love to those nations that have terrorized us, but also for us to pay our debt of love to our nation, the nation that perpetuates such terror?

At the start of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, I participated in an anti-war demonstration in Toronto. One side of my sign said "No blood for oil." The other side said, "Love your enemies." A woman came up to me on the street and said, "But they aren't our enemies! That's the whole point, they aren't our enemies!" I responded by saying "Actually, I'm referring here to George Bush." She looked at me in some amazement and then said, "Oh, I get it", and with one final incredulous look, she quickly walked away.

Paul begins Romans 12 by calling us to be transformed by the renewal of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God --what is good and acceptable and perfect (12.2). Such transformation of our minds, of our imaginations, will indeed be necessary if we are to discern how to live faithfully in the Pax Americana. I can only hope that a realization of the radical and subversive nature of these chapters of Romans will contribute to such a renewal.