

Paul, empire and eschatology

**Author:**Philip La.G. du Toit¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of New Testament, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Mahikeng, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Philip du Toit,
philip.dutoit@nwu.ac.za

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Various approaches to Paul's relationship with the Roman Empire have come to the fore, including those who see Paul's discourse as anti-imperial, pro-imperial, ambiguous towards empire and those who argue that Paul's discourse transcends that of empire. The nature and influence of the Roman Empire are examined, and the various scholarly approaches to Paul's relationship to empire are considered. Romans 13:1–7 is used as a test case to better understand Paul's stance towards the Roman Empire or government authorities in general. Although it has been argued that Paul's stance towards empire was influenced by 'Jewish apocalyptic', in this contribution, it is argued that Paul's eschatology as laid out in his letters rather than 'Jewish apocalyptic' as such is key to understanding the seemingly ambiguous statements about the Roman Empire in his letters.

Contribution: This article's contribution mainly lies in its approach to understand Paul's relationship to the Roman Empire from the perspective of his own eschatology. Here, traditional understandings of Paul's relationship to empire is put in a larger perspective, which contributes in solving Paul's seemingly ambiguous stance towards Roman authority.

Keywords: Paul; empire; eschatology; government; postcolonialism.

Introduction

The hermeneutical approach to read Paul through the lens of his relationship to the Roman Empire has gained momentum in the past few decades. Various leading scholars have contributed to this approach, which is especially featured in books edited by Richard A. Horsley (ed. 1997, 2000, 2004). As Horsley (2004:1–3) explains, reading Paul through the lens of empire can be understood as a reaction on reading Paul from the lens of his relationship to his Judaeen heritage.¹ In the traditional, so-called 'Lutheran' approach to Paul, his gospel message is understood in terms of justification by faith in Christ over against justification based on works, which would have been part of his Judaeen heritage. In the so-called New Perspective on Paul, Paul's embeddedness in his Judaeen heritage has been reappraised, explaining his gospel not to be against his Judaeen past but rather in continuation with it (e.g. Dunn 1983; Sanders 1977). By reading Paul through the lens of his relationship to the Roman Empire, the assumption of the separation between religion and politics is questioned. In this approach, the Roman Empire is understood in terms of the interwovenness of religious and political elements, which was especially evident in the cultic divinisation and veneration of emperors. Because the gentiles were subjects of the Roman Empire and comprised the bulk of Paul's audiences, his letters are read through the lens of his relationship to empire rather than through his relationship to his Judaeen heritage.

Apart from reacting to reading Paul in relation to his Judaeen heritage, an empire-reading of Paul largely coheres with reading Paul from a postcolonial perspective. In a postcolonial reading, the historical and discursive ways in which imperial powers subdued and oppressed people, are examined, seeking to resist such domination (Smith 2004:47–48). It also fosters the liberation of interdependence amongst nations, races, genders, economics and cultures (e.g. Dube 1996:38; Punt 2015:19; Sugirtharajah 2012:46–47). Postcolonial hermeneutics coheres with the propagation of a new identity that is based on interdependence and transformation, embracing hybridity and liminality, which transcends essentialism and colonial dichotomies (Punt 2015:27–28).

Within the general approach to read Paul through the lens of empire, a variety of specific readings have come to the fore. Initially and currently, most interpreters read Paul as resisting or subverting

1. Horsley (2004:1) refers to Paul's reaction against 'Judaism'. But because Judaism proper is strictly speaking a later development after 70 CE (see Du Toit 2019:31–39; Mason 2007), I rather refer to Paul's Judaeen heritage.

Note: Special Collection: From timely exegesis to contemporary ecclesiology: Relevant hermeneutics and provocative embodiment of faith in a Corona-defined world – Festschrift for Stephan Joubert, sub-edited by Willem Oliver (University of South Africa).

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empire (e.g. Horsley 2004; Mbwangi 2020; Porter 2011; Wright 2000). Other interpreters read Paul as identifying with and confirming the Roman Empire (e.g. Hanc 2014; Harrill 2011; Kim 2008). Some interpreters read Paul as having an ambivalent stance towards the empire (e.g. Punt 2015, 2018) and still others read Paul's discourse as in some way superseding or transcending the imperial discourse (e.g. Barclay 2011; Oakes 2005).

The aim of this article is firstly to describe the nature and influence of the Roman imperial order on the people to whom Paul wrote and secondly to attempt to describe Paul's relationship to the Roman Empire. Thirdly, Paul's stance towards the Roman Empire will be examined on the basis of Romans 13:1–7 as a test case. Lastly, Paul's eschatology will be probed for its bearing on his stance towards the Roman imperial state and the way in which it helps us to understand his relationship to empire.

The nature and influence of the Roman Empire

The Roman Empire severely affected the world in which Paul lived, especially in respect of the power relations in the imperial order. As Horsley (2004:11–14) points out, one of the important factors that brought instability in local life was the disruption and displacement of indigenous people by Roman conquest, enslavement and colonisation. In respect of Paul's audiences, for example, Galatia was taken over by the Romans. Philippi was colonised by the Romans and indigenous farmers had been dispossessed. In Corinth, as a principal centre of trade between Rome and the East, many rootless people gathered gradually. The most extreme form of displacement was slavery, being one of the fundamental building blocks of society. The idea of 'upward mobility' was probably overestimated.

Another practice that had a fundamental influence in society was the principle of patronage. Elites within the Roman Empire cultivated personal patronage of the emperor and in turn patronised public life in the cities, creating a public face of beneficence to its subjects and thereby ensured public order. Personal and public relationships were interconnected and overlapped, creating a vast network of patronage (Horsley 2004:14–16).

One of the most important factors in assessing Paul's relationship to the Roman Empire is the influence of the so-called imperial cult. The elite developed the practice of venerating and celebrating Augustus and his successors as divine figures, as Lords and Saviours of the world. The emperor was considered to stand in the centre of the divine powers. This practice was especially developed in the Greek cities on the basis of the already-existing civil religion. Temples, statues and shrines that were dedicated to the emperor pervaded public space. The imperial cult became one of the most important expressions and sponsors of social cohesion (Horsley 2004:16–17). In this regard, Porter (2011:166–175) points to the importance of *OGIS* 458, a

bilingual calendar inscription that was erected at various places in Asia Minor in celebration of Augustus' birthday in 9 BCE. On this inscription, Augustus is described in terms of father Zeus, Saviour of the universal human race. Paulus Fabius Maximus, governor of Asia, was also named on the inscription. He enjoyed widespread recognition for erecting the calendrical inscription and gained divine honours at his death. Numerous similar inscriptions venerating emperors were found, starting with Julius Caesar and continuing through his successors until Nero. Julius Caesar was widely regarded as Saviour and Benefactor, and the divinisation of Augustus was even more widespread. Paul would definitely be aware of this practice of divinisation.

J. Albert Harrill (2011:282–285) and Jeremy Punt (2018:3–4), however, critique the idea that Roman imperialism and the cultic practices in the empire were based on a hegemonic ideology or even that Roman culture was a stable category. Much of Harrill's critique revolves around the way in which culture is studied. In the 1960s, for example, Clifford Geertz (1973) redefined culture as a system of meanings that are embodied in the historically transmitted symbols that are utilised to control human behaviour. In respect of Rome, Harrill (2011:289) points out that it 'governed with much less integration of its central culture onto the periphery'. Native cults were not systematically replaced. There was no single, homogenous Roman identity. Roman culture involved subcultures that included Judaeian culture. To be Roman can thus be described as a kind of discourse, especially about the nature and authority of power (Harrill 2011:290–291). Harrill (2011) describes ideology as the:

[L]anguage that colludes with, supports, and makes sense of the current structures of authority and domination that a particular society uses to construct its social 'reality' and in which writers can participate even if the collusion is not altogether conscious. (p. 291)

Harrill (2011:304) thus also critiques the idea of 'the' imperial cult. He points out that local populations worshipped the emperor through their own native cults and festivals. It would thus be more correct to speak of *emperor worship* than '*the*' imperial cult. Similarly, Punt (2018:4) views the Roman Empire as structural, differentiated and negotiated. The empire is thus seen as a dynamic process.

Another area in which the influence of the Roman Empire pervaded was in the area of public rhetoric by which the Roman imperial order was maintained. Conformity to the established order was mainly driven by fear of the sword and seeking consent. Rhetoric was used as an instrument of participatory politics in which rival politicians attempted to influence the city assembly to act in a certain way or to reach a specific verdict in a judicial case. In the patriarchal family, rhetoric served the function of maintaining relations of domination, including the legitimisation of slavery and the domination of women. Civic festivals were also coloured by public eloquence, and good speech was heard at the agora or theatre, becoming a principal form of entertainment. The Roman rule was pictured as beneficial, which was presented

as the work of the gods. Oratory thus constituted a principal source of culture (Horsley 2004:17–19).

Harrill (2011:289–290, 297–298), however, resists the idea of Roman ‘propaganda’. Because propaganda normally conceals itself and the Augustian Roman Revolution did not conceal itself, but widely reaffirmed its beliefs about Augustian power, Harrill rather replaces the term ‘propaganda’ with the term *auctoritas*. This latter term describes the quality of actual power in an individual person (*auctor*) that subordinates and colleagues had willingly granted. This has more to do with influence. There is also a distinction between personal *auctoritas* and transactional *potestas* (official power) of government officials. *Auctoritas* was achieved in concrete events in which subordinates expressed acceptance of the *auctor*’s point of view and wishes. Non-Romans also participated in Roman discourse by reproducing the discourse of *auctoritas* in their daily lives, which was the discourse of Roman cultural identity. For example, Augustus surpassed all others in *auctoritas*, but he did not possess more official power (*potestas*) than his colleagues in each magistracy.

Paul’s relationship to the Roman Empire

According to scholars, such as Georgi (1991), Elliott (2000), Wright (2000), Callahan (2000), Horsley (2004), Porter (2011) and Mbwangi (2020), Paul’s gospel is set in anti-imperial terms in which he understood his communities as representing an alternative society. According to this approach, Paul was ‘in but not of’ the Roman imperial order in that he shared the language and particular forms of persuasion of the empire but actually resisted it (Horsley 2004:19). Neil Elliott (2000) argues that Paul was a defeated and despised victim of imperial violence, but by Christ’s crucifixion by the ‘rulers of this age’ (1 Cor 2:6), God inaugurated the subjection of imperial rulers.

According to Wright (1994, 2000), on the one hand, Paul’s gospel is the fulfilment of Isaiah 40 and 52, in which Israel is comforted and a message of hope was brought to the whole world. On the other hand, it celebrates the accession or birth of a king or emperor. Wright understands the title κύριος ascribed to Jesus the Messiah as both a ‘political’ and ‘religious’ title in direct challenge to the lordship of Caesar. For example, Wright (2000:173–174) reads Philippians 3, in which believers are presented as having their citizenship in heaven and await their Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, as coded language that ‘was a challenge to an alternative loyalty’.

Similarly, Porter (2011:184) understands the Letter to the Romans as being ‘delivered to the heart of the empire with the bold statement that there is only one true Lord, Jesus Christ’ (Rm 1:4). In respect of Romans 13:1–7, which is normally considered as a *crux interpretum* regarding Paul’s stance towards the Roman state, Porter (2011:185–186, 190) resists interpreting Romans 13 as indicating unqualified obedience

to the state, understanding the statement in verse 1, ‘there is no authority except from God’ (ἔστιν ἐξουσία εἰ μὴ ὑπὸ θεοῦ), as consistent with the epistolary letter opening in which Jesus is presented as ‘Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν, Rm 1:4). He thus interprets this passage in a qualified sense, presupposing just authorities that rightly exercise their powers. Porter explains the submission that Paul has in mind in Romans 13:1–7 as willing submission to the Roman state, for only a just authority can be a minister of God for good purpose. Ultimately, Porter reads Paul as advocating the replacement of one hierarchy with another.

Mbwangi (2020:6), who also interprets Paul’s rhetoric as anti-imperial, sees Galatians 3:1 in which Paul presents Jesus as ‘publicly portrayed/exhibited as crucified’ (προεγράφη ἐσταυρωμένος) as a ‘political response’ by which the Galatians are persuaded ‘to contest Rome’s claims of political supremacy’. The statement in this text is read as provoking the memories of the congregation concerning the lordship of Jesus who was crucified and thereby to subordinate the supremacy of the imperial cult as well as the mediatory culture of the elites to Christ’s lordship (Mbwangi 2020:7). With Porter (2011), Mbwangi (2020:6–7, 9) reads Romans 13:1–7 as conveying conditional and qualitative obedience in which the authority of the state must be acceptable to God. The Christian identity is thus read as a superordinate identity that advances Christian norms and values whilst subordinating all other cultural norms and values such as the Celtic ethnic group, Judaeans from the diaspora and the Roman Empire.

In contrast to the above scholars, Harrill (2011:295) argues that Paul’s language in Romans 13 participates in the wider ideology that supports the domination of Rome. For Harrill (2011:299–303), Paul’s language is similar to the discourse of *auctoritas* (see above), sharing in Roman cultural identity. On the basis of 1 Corinthians 9:1–6, 12 and 15–18, in which Paul renounces his rights, Harrill argues that Paul gains *auctoritas* by giving up *exousia/protestas*, similar to Augustus’ refusal of powers. The same would be true in respect of Philippians 2:6–11 in which Paul would participate in moral reasoning in which authority is routed through analogous patterns of inversion and personal example. According to Harrill, Paul composed the hymn in this passage in the same way as civic functionaries would compose such prose hymns to proclaim the powers, achievements and benefactions of the emperor. Paul’s discourse would thus not subvert the logic of Roman imperial thinking but constitute instances of it.

In a similar way, Hanc (2014) critiques the idea that Paul’s discourse would be anti-imperial. He rather sees Christology and imperialism as mutually inclusive realities. Romans 13:1–7 would not be subverting empire but rather be a submission to God’s supreme authority. For Hanc, the Christian community and civil authority can coexist. Social entities would be appointed by God and the kingdom of God would not usurp the Roman Empire.

In terms of Paul's discourse, Kim (2008:68–70) does not consider the church to be replacing the Roman Empire and neither that Paul would have an anti-imperial intent, which Kim ascribes to superficial parallelism drawn between Paul's discourse and Roman imperial ideology (parallelomania). Kim rather explains much of Paul's terminology (e.g. κύριος, σωτήρ/σωτηρία, εὐαγγέλιον, ἐκκλησία, δικαιοσύνη) as based on the Old Testament. According to Kim, Paul probably had a positive view of the *pax Romana* in that it would constitute the necessary presupposition for the all-important mission in the whole inhabited earth. Romans 13:1–7 would thus affirm the Roman authorities as divinely appointed guardians of justice and order, being conducive to Paul's universal mission.

For Jeremy Punt (2015:215–218, 2018), Paul's relationship to the Roman Empire is ambivalent. Punt (2018) accentuates Paul's hybrid identity, constituted by both his Judaeian heritage and his Roman identity. Although Punt identifies instances of subverting the empire, he also points out that Paul was embedded within it. For Punt, Paul would not be apolitical or privatised, in that his letters would be confined to the level of individual piety. On the one hand, Punt argues that Paul did see Rome as an evil power, being the dwelling place of demons (1 Cor 10:20–21) and as cohering with 'the present evil age' (Gl 1:4). Paul's references to the foolishness of Rome (1 Cor 2:6) would constitute a condemnation of Rome's hierarchical, exploitive and legionary empire. Yet much of Paul's anti-imperial discourse has to be understood as based on Paul's commitment to 'Jewish apocalyptic'. On the other hand, Punt sees Paul as negotiating empire and as adhering to imperial discourse. His language about the 'weak' and the 'strong' (e.g. 1 Cor 2:1–5; 2 Cor 12), for example, would situate Paul:

[W]ithin the ideological grammar of the Roman elite, for whom strength or power was equated with honour and wealth, while weakness was identified with the shamefulness of the lower classes. (Punt 2015:224; cf. Reasoner 1999)

Other scholars explain Paul's relationship to the Roman Empire as neither being pro-imperial nor anti-imperial, but as transcending imperial discourse. So, for example, Oakes (2005:321–322) does not see Rome in conflict with Christianity but rather that Christianity redraws the map of the universe in which Christ is brought to the centre and Rome and the imperial family is decentred. For Oakes, Paul in Philippians and 1 Thessalonians remaps space and time. The power structure of the universe is thus remapped and rearranged. Similar to Oakes (2005), Barclay (2011:386–387) argues that Paul radically reframes reality, including political reality. Paul would remap the world so that the imperial cult's claims would be reduced, and the Roman Empire would become insignificant. For Barclay, the fact that Paul did not mention the statues of the Caesar indicates that the Roman Empire was not a significant actor in the drama of history. Rather, the empire's agency was derived from and dependent on divine or Satanic powers far more powerful than itself. Paul thus remapped the cosmos and opposes 'anti-God' powers. In other words, the Roman Empire became insignificant in light

of an epistemology that placed politics on a wider, more complex stage.

A closer look at Romans 13:1–7

Romans 13:1–7 constitutes Paul's most direct and sustained advice about believers' relationship to government. This passage's seemingly unconnectedness to the immediate context in the letter has given rise to the idea that these seven verses are an interpolation (e.g. O'Neill 1975:207–209; Schmithals 1975:458–462), but most scholars now agree that there is insufficient reason to doubt its authenticity (e.g. Käsemann 1980:351; Longenecker 2016:951). In verse 1, Paul commands 'every soul' (πᾶσα ψυχή) to 'submit' (ὑποτάσσω) to the governing authorities and then motivates such a course of action by the statement that there is no 'authority' (ἐξουσία) except from God and that those who exist have been 'appointed/instituted' (τάσσω) by God. Although some scholars have argued that Paul has spiritual authorities in mind (e.g. Schmidt 1937), most commentators agree that Paul has secular government in view (see Moo 2018:812–813). Some of the main questions underlying this passage are the following: (1) What is the specific context of Paul's advice here? (2) Does Paul here provide advice of submission to governments in general or does he have the Roman Empire in mind in particular? (3) Does Paul advocate unqualified obedience to the state? (4) Is this passage pro- or anti-imperial? These questions will be addressed in order.

Regarding the context, it is quite probable that some of the Christians were in some way affected by the expulsion of Judaeans from Rome by Caesar Claudius in 49 CE.² We also know from writers such as Tacitus (*Annales* 13.50–51) and Suetonius (*Nero* 10.1) that there were unrest and complaints in Rome against extortionate practices of tax collectors at the time. As a result, it might be that some Christians rebelled against the Roman Empire in the years following (Jewett 2006:309–310; Witherington & Hyatt 2004:309).

Another possible contextual factor is the idea that the Roman believers adhered to a kind of 'overly enthusiastic' or even 'extremist' understanding of the new era of life in Christ over against the old era or the old world. In such a stance, believers might have been suspicious about anything belonging to the old era, including earthly governments (Longenecker 2016:953). In other words, some believers in Rome could have adhered to a kind of over-realised eschatology against which Paul would react. In a similar vein, Wright (2002:720) argues that although Paul sees the present in light of the future, Romans 13:1–7 does not describe a new, eschatological situation, but as being 'under the sign of ultimate judgment'. The 'eschatological balance' must thus be kept. According to Wright, although not being under the ultimate authority of Caesar but under Christ's lordship, Christians must still adhere to the authority of the worldly state albeit using the 'methods of the Messiah himself (12:14–21)'.

²The Letter to the Romans is normally regarded as being written at around 57 CE (Longenecker 2016:6; Moo 2018:3).

In respect of the generality of Paul's admonition, although the above-mentioned (possible) scenarios have to be kept in mind, most commentators read Paul's reference to submission to government as a general statement that is applicable to all governments (e.g. Longenecker 2016:952; Middendorf 2016:1286; Schreiner 2018b:660; Wright 2002:717; cf. Jewett 2006:787). Such generality can especially be derived from the 'gnomic style' of the admonition in 13:1, which involves 'every soul' (Jewett 2006:787; cf. Harvey 2017).³ In other words, although Paul probably reacted against a specific situation, and his admonition in Romans 13:1–7 definitely involves obedience to the Roman Empire, the principles that Paul lays down about submission to the state can be regarded as principles that apply to all people and all governments.

Regarding the question whether Paul advances the notion of unqualified obedience to the state, Cranfield (1979:660–663) and Moo (2018:814) draw attention to the fact that Paul in verse 1 uses the word 'submission' (ὑποτάσσω), which has to be differentiated from the idea of obedience as such (cf. also Lim 2015:8; Middendorf 2016:1311–1312). Jewett (2006:788) goes further and argues that ὑποτάσσω can have the notion of 'to submit voluntarily' (cf. 1 Cor 16:6) on the basis of the possibility that ὑποτασσεῖσθω in verse 1 and ὑποτάσσεσθαι in verse 5 are in the middle voice (so Perschbacher 1990:422; cf. New International Version on v. 5; Thielman 2018:608).⁴ But more importantly, Moo (2018:814, 820, 826) argues that the idea of submission involves 'to recognize one's subordinate place in a hierarchy' and interprets this passage as denoting 'God's providential ordering of human history'. In Moo's understanding, obedience to the government is thus not absolute, and it should be evaluated in light of the gospel. Similarly, Jewett (2006:789) argues that willing subordination is subject to the principles set forth in Romans 12:1–2 not to conform to this world but be transformed on the basis of God's will in specific situations. Wright (2002:717) points out that the idea that the state derives its authority from God is 'based on God's appointed order in creation'. Such a connection would be in continuation with Paul's references to God's created order in Romans 1:19–25. Furthermore, the reference to 'authority' (ἐξουσία) in Romans 13:1–3, which is derived from God, probably also evokes Romans 9:21 in which Paul refers to the image of the Potter (God) who has the 'authority' (ἐξουσία) over the clay to make objects for special purposes.⁵ Several scholars (e.g. Dunn 1988:770; Jewett 2006:789; Middendorf 2016:1287; Moo 2018:811, 815; Schreiner 2018b:664; Thielman 2018:607) point out that the idea that the ultimate authority of the state is derived from God can be traced back to the Old Testament (e.g. Jr 27:5–6; Dn 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21). According to Dunn (1988:770–771), Paul's rationale in Romans 13:1 is clear: 'political authority is from God', but by the same token,

3. Harvey (2011) sees the present tense verb ὑποτασσεῖσθω (v. 1) as a gnomic present.

4. The middle voice normally has a reflexive meaning and indicates the subject's participation in the action: 'I subject myself' (see Wallace 1996:414–416). However, most translations and commentaries take these two instances of the verb as passives (see Moo 2018:814).

5. It is interesting that the reference to the Potter is in context of Israel who has been hardened, not as an end in itself, but as a necessary step in the history of salvation to bring about salvation in Christ (see Du Toit 2019:239–251).

authorities are also subject to God's judgement, as is clear from the book of Daniel (Dn 4:13–25; 5:20–21).

The question whether this passage is pro- or anti-imperial is a bit more complex. As for those who advocate an anti-imperial reading of Paul, according to Carter (2004), irony is at play when Paul commends the state in Romans 13:1–7. He argues that there is a lack of correspondence between the words that Paul uses and the reality, which points in the direction of verbal irony. The authorities may have been appointed by God, but they do not fulfil their divinely allotted function. The reasons given for the required submission to the state are thus interpreted as spurious, commending an ironic reading of this passage. By using irony, Paul would express criticism without the fear of persecution. Carter reads Romans 13:1–7 in line with Romans 12:20–21 in which Paul refers to feeding one's enemies and giving them something to drink in order to shame them. It has to be noted, however, that Carter (2006:92) in his later work points out that Paul was also deeply influenced by the world of empire, imitating imperial concepts in his presentation of God's overwhelming power.

Another proponent of an anti-imperial reading is Lim (2015), who argues that Romans 13:1–7 is a 'double-voiced discourse' in that it both conveys the 'voice of assimilation and the voice of resistance in the colonial milieu'. Although the imperial cult seems to be endorsed in Paul's 'hidden transcript', he disguises his resistance against emperor worship in his anti-idolatry stance in Romans 1:18–32. Because Paul proclaims in Romans 1:23 that God's honour is not exchangeable with the honour of mortal human beings, it implies that he denounces the imperial cult that assigns divinity to Roman emperors. Yet, on the basis of Paul's apocalyptic theology, the assumption is that God will only put an end to idolatry in the last judgement. The Roman Empire thus derives their authority from the 'unconditional authority of God'. For Lim, 'ultimate honour, fear and authority ultimately lean toward God rather than the imperial rulers'. Romans 13:1–7 is, thus, to be understood as a parody that 'both co-exists and clashes with the public transcript of the elites'. In a similar fashion, Moe (2017) reads Romans 13:1–7 as a 'hidden transcript', which it constitutes a form of postcolonial resistance rather than adherence to a 'public transcript' of domination. Moe draws from Jewett (2006:789–790), who argues that Paul's main point is to show that the state derives its authority from God and not from idols such as Jupiter or Mars. Their authority should thus be exercised in a right way, for if not, their authority cannot be considered to be appointed by God. According to Moe (2017:98), Romans 13:1 is thus not 'a command to blindly be subject to' the authorities. People's submission must be 'willingly only if authorities are subject to God who appoints them'. In Jewett's (2006:790) words, '[s]ubmission to the governmental authorities is ... an expression of respect not for the authorities themselves but for the crucified deity who stands behind them'. Porter (2011:185–186, 190, 2015:245, 250) understands Romans 13:1–7 similarly in that in Paul's admonition to submit to the authorities, he would expect morally upright and just authorities (cf. Mbwangi 2020:6–7, 9).

In respect of those who argue against an anti-imperial reading of Paul, Kim (2008:70) contends that Romans 13:1–7 is the ‘Achilles’ heel of any anti-imperial interpretation of Paul’ (cf. Middendorf 2016:1286). As discussed above, Kim sees the *pax Romana* as conducive to Paul’s mission. Middendorf (2016) argues that:

[I]t is difficult to believe that Paul intends his hearers to grasp that he is engaged in subtle counter-government subterfuge in the face of his *direct and repeated statements* which call for them to be subject to rulers and fear their authority (emphasis original). (p. 1286)

He sides with Dunn (1988:491) who contends that it would be unlikely that the Caesar cult was at that stage already responsible for the clashing of loyalties. Yet, Middendorf (2016:1311–1312) argues with Moo (2018:814)⁶ that although Paul’s language has to be taken at face value and that political authority has to be understood as ordained by God (cf. Dunn 1988:770), the word ‘submit’ (ὕποτάσσω, Rm 13:1, 5) does not necessarily imply strict and universal obedience (see above).

Another strong proponent of a pro-imperial reading of Romans 13:1–7 is Harrill (2011:295) who contends that Paul in this passage participates in the wider ideology of supporting the dominion of Rome. Harrill (2011:297) argues that Paul wants his audience to fulfil their civic duties ‘and then forget about them because such duties to outsiders are not what matters; the ultimate obligation is mutual love that builds up the internal Christian community’. Paul thus does not “subvert” Roman “propaganda” but, rather, participates and is implicated in the principal concept of Roman power and authority, known as *auctoritas*’ (see above). Paul would hereby confirm the Judaeian notion that God is in charge of all events and that nothing would happen apart from God’s will. Similarly, Hanc (2014:315–316) views an anti-imperial reading as an esoteric reading because the use of anti-imperial terminology would not imply an anti-imperial agenda. He argues that the ‘fact that the Christian community and civil authority can coexist as God appointed social entities, authenticates that the kingdom of God does not usurp the Roman Empire’. For Hanc, Paul follows a ‘theological mandate that transcends socio-political realities’.

It is significant to note that the theme of God’s judgement is at play in Romans 13:1–7 in that those who resist the authorities that are God’s ‘ordinance’ (διαταγή, v. 2) or has been ‘set in place’ (τάσσω, v. 1) by God will receive ‘judgement’ (κρίμα, v. 2). This reference to God’s judgement certainly refers to God’s eschatological judgement (Dunn 1988:771; Moo 2018:816; Schreiner 2018b:664). The question is: How does Paul’s eschatology correlate with his stance on empire? This question will be addressed at this point.

Paul’s eschatology in relation to his view of empire

As mentioned above, some scholars have argued that Paul’s view of empire was influenced by ‘Jewish apocalyptic’,

6. Middendorf relied on the first edition of Moo’s commentary that was published in 1996.

which involves the view that the current world is ending but also that the current world is evil (e.g. Elliott 1994:93–139; Punt 2015:177–181). Caution is warranted here, however. With the exception of *1 Enoch*, many of the writings used as reference for Paul’s so-called ‘Jewish apocalyptic’ viewpoint such as *2 Baruch*, *4 Ezra*, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and the *Sibylline Oracles* actually postdate Paul (see Collins 1998; Du Toit 2019:292). It might be that in Paul’s time, many of the Jewish apocalyptic ideas were underway, but it would be safer to work from Paul’s own understanding of eschatology in his letters in interpreting his stance towards empire, which I will present as the key to unlocking Paul’s seemingly ambivalent stance towards empire.

A prominent passage in understanding Paul’s eschatology in relation to his stance on empire is Romans 18:18–25. In this passage, Paul compares the ‘suffering of the present time’ (παθήματα τοῦ νῦν καιροῦ) with the glory that will be revealed (v. 18). He then envisions creation as eagerly awaiting the revelation of God’s children (v. 19). For Paul, creation is subject to ‘futility’ or ‘purposelessness’ (μταιότης) because of God who subjected it as such in hope that creation itself will be set free from the bondage of ‘corruption’ or ‘deterioration’ (φθορά) and obtain the freedom of the glory of God’s children (v. 20–21). Believers are thus saved in hope (v. 24) of the redemption of the whole created order (Porter 2015:168–169) in the eschaton. Moo (2018:533–534) argues that the sufferings entail more than suffering for the sake of Christ but includes the whole world that is in rebellion against God, pointing to the sufferings of ‘the old age of salvation history’. Yet, more to the point, according to Jewett (2004:31–36), the whole creation includes ‘the Adamic legacy of corruption and disorder’, arguing that this passage goes against the imperial idea that the Roman gods already ushered in the so-called ‘golden age’ through its victorious Caesar. For the Romans, the imperial cult was seen as instrumental in restoring the ‘golden age’. Yet for Paul, the natural world has not been restored by the Roman imperium but is subject to God’s triumph over and redemption of the adversity and corruption of the cosmic order.

Another important passage that directly involves government and eschatology is 1 Corinthians 2:6–8. Although Christ in his death and resurrection already became Lord of the cosmos in principle, people are still living in a fallen world in which ‘the rulers of this age’ (τῶν ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος, vv. 6, 8) are still operative but are ultimately ‘doomed to pass away’ (English Standard Version [ESV]; cf. New Revised Standard Version) or ‘are coming to nothing’ (New International Version, τοῦτου τῶν καταργουμένων, v. 6), which is surely an eschatological reference to God’s final judgement (Fee 2014:110; Hafemann 1996:301–313; Gardner 2018:138). But as the verb is in the present participle form, their fate probably points to a continuous yet unstoppable process (Thiselton 2000:231–232). The expression τῶν ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος could point to both the political leaders and demonic

7. Fee (2014:110) points out that the verb καταργέω is also used in 1:28 in which the context is also eschatological. But it is especially Hafemann (1996:301–313) who demonstrates the eschatological significance of this verb in Paul, in that it constitutes discontinuity between this age and the age to come.

powers behind them,⁸ but probably primarily refers to the political leaders of Paul's day (Gardner 2018:138; Schreiner 2018a:81; cf. Fee 2014:110). Thiselton (2000:232) interprets τῶν ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος as pointing to the 'present world order' that is about to pass away.

In Paul, part of the old created order is current bodily life. In 2 Corinthians 5:1–5, he compares 'our earthly dwelling' (ἐπίγειος ἡμῶν οἰκία) with a house not made with hands, which is eternal in heaven (v. 1). For Paul, we long 'to clothe ourselves' (ἐπενδύσασθαι) with heavenly dwelling (v. 2). That which is 'mortal' (θνητός) will be swallowed up by 'life' (ζωή, v. 4). Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 15:50–54, 'flesh and blood' (σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα) in this life cannot inherit God's kingdom (v. 50). The physical body has to be transformed (v. 51): the 'perishable' (φθαρτός) body is 'to clothe itself' (ἐνδύσασθαι) with that which is 'imperishable' (ἀφθαρσία) and the 'mortal' (θνητός) body must clothe itself with 'immortality' (ἀθανασία, v. 53). Current bodily existence will thus be transformed into an existence of a renewed, immortal and imperishable bodily life in the eschaton.

In Romans 7:5–6, Paul contrasts living 'in the flesh' (ἐν τῇ σαρκί, v. 5) with service 'in the new way of the Spirit' (ἐν καινότητι πνεύματος) that has 'now' (νυνί, v. 6) become a reality. From this contrast between 'flesh' and 'Spirit', it can be derived that the 'flesh' here points to an existence in an eschatologically old era under law, sin and death, whereas the 'Spirit' points to an existence in the eschatologically new era under the lordship of Christ, under the life-giving Spirit. The flesh-Spirit contrast as expressed in these two verses thus ultimately involves an eschatological contrast between an old existence in the eschatologically old age and a new existence in the new eschatological age in Christ that already started to become a reality (esp. Fee 1994:469–470; Moo 2018:48; see Du Toit 2019:190–191, 221).

From a Pauline, eschatological perspective, the old creation, the old existence under the power of sin, corruption and futility is about to pass away in light of the new creation. By the cross and resurrection, Christ inaugurated a new eschatological era in which the new creation already became a spiritual reality in believers' lives (2 Cor 5:17), but all people still await the birth of the physical new creation, which includes a new immortal and incorruptible bodily existence under the lordship of Christ and the Spirit. The fact of Christ's lordship of the new era is clear from many prominent statements in this regard in Paul's letters (esp. Rm 1:4; 10:9–12; 14:9; 1 Cor 8:6; 12:3; Phlp 2:5–11). In Philippians 2:10–11, Paul proclaims that every knee should bow and every tongue in heaven and earth should confess that Christ is 'Lord' (κύριος). As Keown (2017:435) indicates, hereby included is 'Caesar and other claimants to world dominion and power', including 'spiritual forces on earth' (cf. Fee 1995:224).

8.Ciampa and Rosner (2010) argue that according to 'Jewish apocalyptic', evil, supernatural figures are behind such acts against God. As pointed out above, although one must be cautious to equate Paul's eschatology to (mostly later) 'Jewish apocalyptic', such a notion can be considered as a possibility here.

According to Thompson (2016:74), the 'political significance' of Paul's claim would be apparent to the congregants. For Thompson, '[t]his claim is a challenge to Roman power'. Similarly, Reumann (2008:374) remarks that the claim that Jesus Christ is Lord would be the 'most direct anti-Roman claim' and even that the reference to God the Father in verse 11 might be directed to Zeus as 'Father' of Caesar. Although Christ's lordship will only be fully realised in the eschaton, according to Philippians 2:8–9, his lordship can be seen a direct result of the Messiah's eschatological exaltation through the cross, which presupposes resurrection and ascension (Fee 1995:223).

Another important distinction that has to be drawn, which coheres with Paul's eschatology, is a distinction between religion and theology. It is indeed so that from the perspective of ancient culture, religion and politics cannot be separated as the practice of emperor worship demonstrates. Yet, at its core, 'religion', which includes a variety of religious or cultic practices, can be understood as a human endeavour, being part of human culture (Guthrie 2000:225–226). In Galatians 4:9–11, Paul speaks negatively about the so-called 'weak and poor/miserable' elementary principles' (ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα) of this world that include the observation of certain days, months, seasons and years, that work against the 'forming' (μορφώω) of Christ within the believers (Gl 4:19). The word στοιχεῖα was often associated with the various religious acts in the heathen world, which Paul seems to equate with the Galatians' desire to turn back to certain religious practices of the Mosaic law (Das 2014:444; Moo 2013:277–278). Similarly in the Letter to the Colossians,¹⁰ 'religious' acts, which include things such as asceticism or false humility (ταπεινοφοσύνη, Col 2:18, 23), the worship of angels, the going into the detail of visions (Col 2:18) and regulations (διδασκαλίας) about touching, tasting or handling things (Col 2:20–21) are considered as a distraction, away from Christ (Col 2:19). These things are all 'within the general framework of cultic concerns' (Pao 2012:195). These religious acts are considered as 'according to human commandments and doctrines' (κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων), which 'have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion' (ἐστὶν λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας ἐν ἐθελοθησκίᾳ, ESV, Col 2:22–23). Yet, these *human*, 'religious' acts as laid out in Colossians 2:16–23 are contrasted with *divine* action in 3:1–4, which is about being raised with Christ, the things above and Christ who is believers' life (see Du Toit 2020:3). In other words, religion can be understood as being on an *anthropological* level, whereas Christ's lordship is on a *theological* level, which transcends the anthropological domain but ultimately encompasses it. The ultimate reality of Christ's lordship thus indeed *transcends* the cultural, political and even religious spheres (including the Roman Empire), which all resort under that which is human and part of the old creation.

9.The word πτωχός could also be rendered as 'lacking in spiritual worth' (Moo 2013:277).

10.Although Colossians' authenticity is disputed by some, many recent scholars ascribe to its authenticity (see Beale 2019:1–8 for a recent discussion). Yet, for the sake of the argument here, it is not essential to adhere to Pauline authorship.

In 1 Corinthians 8:4, Paul refers to an 'idol' (εἰδωλον) as 'nothing in this world' (οὐδὲν εἰδωλον ἐν κόσμῳ). He also refers to 'so called gods' (λεγόμενοι θεοί), which he contrasts with the notion put forth in Deuteronomy 6:4 that there is only one God as well as that there is one Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 8:5–6). He later repeats the same notion by asking the rhetorical question if an idol is anything, followed by the idea that pagans who offer to idols actually offer to demons (1 Cor 10:19–20). As Schreiner (2018a:170–171) points out, it is not that Paul considers idols as actual gods. He rather considers them as 'the product of human imagination', but that idols could 'become an occasion for demonic influence'. Similarly, Fee (2014:412) argues that for Paul, the gods existed subjectively for those who believed in them. He adds that the terms 'gods' (θεοί) and 'lords' (κύριοι, 1 Cor 8:5) 'reflect the two basic forms of Greco-Roman religion as it had been modified by the coming of the Oriental cults'. Paul probably had 'gods' such as Zeus and Athena in mind. Harrill (2011:304) argues that Paul's reference to many gods and lords participates in the wider 'cultural discourse' in which the use of these terms was not confined to emperor worship. Although Paul in his reference to idols in 1 Corinthians 8–10 almost certainly does not have emperor worship in mind, it tells something about Paul's world view. It could reasonably be inferred that Paul would view emperor worship in a similar light, being a *human or cultural endeavour*, especially in view of the prominence of the notion in his mind that there is only one God (Dt 6:4), which would eliminate the possibility that he would consider emperors as actual gods.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the diverse views discussed above, to determine Paul's stance towards the Roman Empire is not a simple matter. Yet, I have argued that the understanding of Paul's own eschatology is the key to understanding the seemingly ambivalent way in which he positions himself towards the government authorities. In doing so, I have critiqued the tendency amongst scholars to model much of Paul's eschatology on 'Jewish apocalyptic', which is largely a later development. It is within the tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' in Paul's eschatology that his stance towards the Roman Empire can be read as being both subversive but also as being embedded within it. Although Paul's view of authority is principally and ultimately defined by God's authority and rule over the cosmos as it became manifested through the death and resurrection of God's Son, believers are still subject to a fallen reality in this creation in which worldly powers and rulers are still operative. Yet, believers principally live on the basis of another reality, which is not to be conformed to the patterns or schemes (συσχηματίζω) of this world but to be transformed by the renewal of their minds (Rm 12:2). Believers must still submit to worldly governmental authority, which is to acknowledge God's created order (Rm 13:1). But such an action probably does not imply strict obedience under all circumstances. At the same time, however, Christians must live from the reality of the new creation and the lordship of Christ over all other

authorities and the eschatological hope that God is about to end the present created order, including present worldly authorities. These notions can be derived from Romans 8:18–25 in which Paul describes the creation's longing to be freed from futility, 1 Corinthians 2:6–8 in which the rulers of this age are pictured as temporary, 2 Corinthians 5:1–5 and 1 Corinthians 15:50–54 in which mortal, bodily life is anticipated to be recreated in immortal bodily life, and Romans 7:5–6 in which life in the 'flesh' is pictured as belonging to an eschatologically old era. Paul, thus, subverts empire on a principle and *theological* level, but not as a matter of active political resistance. Paul's subversion of empire is rather an inevitable consequence of the reality of Christ's ultimate cosmic lordship, being part of God's bigger scheme of *redemptive history*. This approach differs from most approaches that tries to directly ascribe Paul's stance towards empire within his rhetoric (i.e. the words/concepts he uses), whether pro-imperial, anti-imperial or ambivalent towards empire. The approach outlined here rather seeks to account for Paul's stance towards empire on the basis of the deep structure of Paul's discourse and thus its theological underpinnings.

As final conclusion, on one level, Paul's subversion of empire is ultimately on a *theological* level, rooted in God's eschatological revelation in Christ and not on a human or *anthropological* level, which includes the religious or cultic domain. Even Paul's reference to idols can be understood as being reduced to the anthropological domain, which arguably could be applied to Paul's view on emperor worship by extension. Yet, on another level, God's revelation in Christ is precisely *aimed at* that which is human and fallible and part of the old created order *in order to* redeem it and bring it under Christ's lordship, even though this redemption is only to be fully realised at the eschaton. In other words, rather than that Paul 'is re-drawing the map of the universe' (Oakes 2005:301) or that he 'reframes reality' (Barclay 2011:386), he *confirms the reality of God's redemptive history under the lordship of his Son* in which the current created order, including earthly governments, has to be endured in hope that it will come to its ultimate end in the birth of the newly created order in the eschaton. The ambivalence in Paul's stance towards empire can thus be linked to the ambivalence between the 'already' and the 'not yet' in Paul's eschatology in which the current created order will come to its designated end within the greater scheme of redemptive history.

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