

## PAUL AND EMPIRE

### A REFRAMING OF ROMANS 13:1-7

#### IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NEW EXODUS<sup>1</sup>

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In Romans 13:1-7, Paul wrote the most emphatic New Testament passage on relations with civil authority. The primary aim of this dissertation has been to propose a rereading of this passage on civil authority by framing it in the context of Paul's rabbinic education, his high view of Scripture, his own self-understanding, and especially in the larger New Exodus paradigm that is present in Romans as the archetype of salvation.

Paul's political parenesis is rooted in the training he underwent, and mostly in his high view of Scripture. There are substantial arguments for positing Paul's use of the Old Testament as the major framework for his theology in general and for his theology of the state in particular.

The study of the Pharisaic movement in the first century is complex and at times ambiguous since the main sources that present this particular group do not have a synoptic approach. However, the writings of Josephus, the Rabbinical sources, and the New Testament point to the fact that the Pharisees were especially concerned with the study of the Mosaic Law. They were active and influential in matters of political affairs, but their political involvement represents specific contextual instances rather than basic stereotypes that characterise the movement as a whole. Paul described himself as a Pharisee prior to his conversion. His high interest in the Mosaic Law and ritual purity are in line with the portrait of the Pharisaic movement. Hence, to argue that the Pharisees were a political party and similarly, Paul had a

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<sup>1</sup> Ovidiu Hanc, *Paul's Response to the Empire in Romans 13.1-7 in the Context of the New Exodus as a Paradigm of Deliverance* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queen's University of Belfast, 2014); supervisor: Dr Hamilton Moore.

theological anti-imperial agenda is to interpret historical data in a subjective manner.

Paul writes to the church in Rome not as a political activist, but rather in terms that resonate with the Isaianic features of the servant of God. His self-understanding as the Servant of the Lord, who seeks for a way of salvation not an escape from society, indicates that the original meaning of his theology is rooted in the Old Testament, not in the socio-political realities of first century Rome. The Scripture represents the all-encompassing factor that motivates simultaneously his citizenship of the Roman Empire and of the Kingdom of God. Paul commands the Church not to subvert the Empire, but to serve it in a Christ-like sacrificial manner. He is not a revolutionary figure but a servant who is willing to submit to civil authority as a servant of Christ.

There is an increasing tendency among scholars to identify the presence of the New Exodus paradigm in most of the New Testament writings. Since this paradigm encapsulates the concept of freedom, the evaluation of Paul's theology of the state in light of the New Exodus theme is required. Paul's theology reproduces the ontology of the Exodus motif, and especially of the Isaianic New Exodus. To construct a theology of the state based on Romans 13 but void of Paul's conceptual framework of deliverance *par excellence* is to ignore the socio-political implications of Paul's message. The exodus narrative is the major event in the Jewish history that had nourished the messianic expectations of the first century. Paul's response to the empire is entirely attuned to this paradigm of liberation that is prevalent in the letter. However, the liberation that is envisioned in the New Exodus paradigm has theological features not political ones.

According to the New Exodus paradigm, the liberation is entirely a divine prerogative. Similarly, there is no instance where Paul challenges his audience to fight for their freedom. Paul builds his theology of the state in line with this paradigm of divine deliverance in a context of the ethic of non-retaliation (chap. 12–14). The believers are not only to submit to civil authority without engaging in subversive activities, but there is also a proactive exhortation of social implications (e.g. acts of *euergetism*). Thus, Paul's use of the New Exodus motif as an important hermeneutical interpretative lens is decisive for a practical socio-political construal of the metanarrative of deliverance. This paradigm attests that in Romans 13:1-7 Paul is not

subverting the Empire, rather he is submitting it to God's supreme authority.

Paul's theocentric theology is the pivotal element of his salvation history. For Paul, Christ performed the authentic Exodus, not just a typological reflection of the first Exodus. Because of this, a correction of the New Exodus is necessary in the sense that the accurate approach to the New Exodus paradigm is that Christ's Exodus was foreshadowed in the Egyptian exodus, not that the Egyptian exodus is explained in Christ's Exodus.

As Paul presented his message, he made use of terms as εὐαγγέλιον, κύριος, σωτήρ/σωτηρία, εἰρήνη, βασιλεία, δικαιοσύνη, υἱὸς θεοῦ, ἐκκλησία etc. These concepts were familiar to the residents of the Empire as they were used in their literature, coins, obelisks, temples, artwork, etc. as elements of imperial propaganda. This is the reason why some scholars have interpreted Paul's writings as 'polemical parallelism' or hidden transcripts of a subversive message against the Roman Empire.

Romans 13 is the Achilles' heel, the most problematic passage for the anti-imperial reading and at the same time the most emphatic non-subversive Pauline teaching. The belief that Paul teaches subversion to civil authority appears to be a presumptuous claim. While the scrutiny of the historical context by Horsley, Wright, Elliot, Walsh, Jewett *et al.* is very thoughtful, the subversive reading of the Biblical accounts is not endorsed by Paul's theology of the state. At the same time, it is vitally important to acknowledge that since Paul's language resonates with the imperial terminology, the message *can* be interpreted as subversive. His response is rooted in Jewish Scripture; nonetheless if it is perceived in light of the imperial context, outside its intentional Old Testament framework, then Paul's paraenesis can be interpreted as subversive.

However, Paul is neither subversive, nor servile because he emphasises that submission must be because of the conscience. He is overtly political in a sense that his high Christology does not exclude or subvert the imperial realities. The subversive interpretation ignores the fact that imperial terminology was not exclusively imperial. Paul's theology is inconsistent with Rome's ideology, however, even if he employs imperial terminology to present Christ, he does not do so to subvert the Roman Empire. The subversive reading of the Biblical record is an esoteric interpretation because the use of imperial

terminology does not necessarily imply an anti-imperial agenda. It is erroneous to infer that the use of this terminology necessarily reflects a anti-political agenda, without acknowledging the use of this terminology as a comparative parallel and as a means to contextualize the message.

While few of the passages that contain references to political matters can be interpreted as being subversive (interpretation that is not beyond doubt), there is not even a single explicit affirmation against the Roman civil authority. Paul's perception of reality is not counter-imperial and because of this, he does not use imperial terminology as antithetical. Also in Paul's theology, Christology and imperialism are not mutually exclusive realities. The Roman Empire was often beneficial for Paul's mission. Paul wrote in a socio-political context that allowed him to present the governing authorities not as maleficent. Hence, he did not have to speak of the alternative, namely resistance.

Since Paul's theology of the state was shaped by his Jewish upbringing in light of the Christ event, an *intentional* covenantal-reading supersedes the *potential* political-reading. His own self-understanding as a servant of the Lord validates the idea that he is not a revolutionary figure but that he follows a theological mandate that transcends socio-political realities. Paul's letter to the Church of Rome is not a political manifesto, because the theme of lordship is not to be understood as insulting Caesar but as a prerogative of Christ. 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.