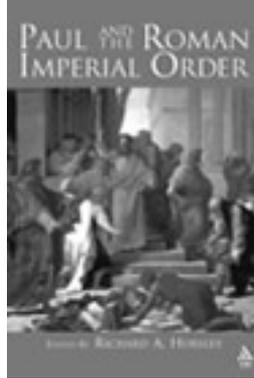


○ REVIEW OF RICHARD A. HORSLEY'S *PAUL AND THE ROMAN IMPERIAL ORDER*

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Robert Paul Seesengood reviews *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, edited by Richard A. Horsley. (New York: Trinity Press; 2004. pp. ix + 198. ISBN 1563384213.)



Paul and the Roman Imperial Order is the latest in a series of works contributed to and edited by Richard Horsley that explores the inter-relationship between Paul's epistemology, imagery, rhetoric and ideology in the prevailing context of Roman Imperial rule. As with the earlier, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in the Roman Imperial Society*, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* is a collection of papers presented at the 'Paul and Politics' group of the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (this particular meeting in 2000 at Nashville, Tennessee). The original panel of Efrain Agosto, Erik M. Heen, Jennifer Wright Knust and Abraham Smith has been supplemented with essays by Neil Elliott, Robert Jewett, and Rollin Ramsaran. Simon R. F. Price (whose work, *Rituals and Power*, on the socio-political implications of the depiction and veneration of the Roman Emperor, informs, perhaps even grounds, several of the essays) was invited to respond to the SBL panel.

Horsley's introduction grounds the volume in a serious appropriation of Stendhal's refusal to identify Paul as a pure *homo religiosus*, aloof from 'mundane' elements of political allegiance, cultural assimilation and colonial resistance. Paul emerges as a complex individual, challenging his culture, appropriating and reshaping his context, engaged in protest and assimilation all simultaneously. Paul and the *corpus Paulinum* are no longer read as abstractions. A seemingly simple notion, the implications of this idea are still surprisingly under-attended in Pauline scholarship. Such can scarcely be expected to remain the case; given critical reading's current and developing interest in postcolonialism, autobiography and subjectivity, and the fusion of popular and 'high' culture, work like that of the Paul and Politics group will surely produce new readings of Paul.

The 'preparatory' quality of much of this work is evident in the notation and content of Horsley's introduction. Apart from references to prior work on Paul, Horsley must offer a generic overview of issues at hand (Roman patronage, the Roman household, slavery, rhetoric, the presence and implications of the worship of the Roman emperor, and the general displacement of peoples under Roman rule) that is noted, when at all, by references to classicists or to his own work and that of other members of the Paul and Politics group. Given their 'pioneer' quality, the essays in this volume produce both excitement and frustration; they often seem to stop short of their potential. For the moment, the essays seem directed toward surfacing particular rhetorical strategies in Paul. The long term ethical, theological and ecclesiological impact of these motifs may take time to emerge.

Robert Jewett's 'The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Reading Rom. 8:18-23 within the Imperial Context', argues that Rom. 8 must be read within a matrix of Roman views of Nature (particularly as articulated by Virgil under the rule of Augustus) and the power of the Roman emperor. Roman convention held that proper rule produced a harmonious cosmos. Paul argues in Rom 8:18-23 that creation is in turmoil, in pain of birth. The kingdom initiated by Christ, Paul asserts, is not only the final means to a peaceful Nature, but is inevitable. Further, contra the Roman Emperor, Christ does not 'conquer' nature; he offers its final redemption.

Abraham Smith's "'Unmasking the Powers": Toward a Postcolonial Analysis of 1 Thessalonians' attends to a somewhat neglected epistle in Pauline studies and explores how Pauline Christianity offered structure and solace to neglected communities of Rome. He argues the social order (as reflected in 1 Thess. 2:14-16) of Pauline communities directly confronts Roman conventions of social hierarchy and the effectiveness of such a structure to establish final 'peace and prosperity'. Roman elites conservatively maintained social order in order to maintain status; Paul's new (eschatologically oriented?) community established true 'peace and security' by the generation of a community whose prestige and status is found in faith.

Neil Elliott's 'The Apostle Paul's Self-Presentation as Anti-Imperial Performance' explores how 2 Corinthians' use of symbols of the Roman domination describe apostolicity and the identity of Jesus as Christ in ways that (yet again) invert normal orders, hierarchies and constructions of imperial identity. While a suffering Christ and apostle are integral to the argument of 2 Corinthians, Elliott asserts that, 'Paul never perceives weakness and suffering as meaningful in and of themselves. Rather, for Paul, the cross manifests God's power because of *its inseparable connection with the resurrection of Christ. No contemplation of the cross alone would have turned its horror into blessing*' (p. 82. Italics original). Defeat is recast as victory. 'Showing faith in the Lord's death thus constitutes a ritual gesture of defiance, a refusal to allow the Empire's exhibition of a crucified corpse to be determinative of the future of Jesus, or the creation' (p. 84). Elliott briefly tackles the ethical implications of this thesis in his 'ecclesiological postscript' addressing contemporary US backed imperialism.

'Resisting Imperial Domination and Influence: Paul's Apocalyptic Rhetoric in 1 Corinthians' by Rollin A. Ramsaran returns to fairly well-worked literature on apocalypticism in 1 Corinthians, and, like many (all?) of these essays, demonstrates that Paul inverts traditional themes and ideas. In some ways, Ramsaran's definition of 'apocalypticism' (p. 90) seems too broad. He, more interestingly, suggests 'Paul clearly combines two registers, that of the Jewish apocalypticist and that of Greco-Roman rhetoric' (p. 100). He argues the resurrection themes appear in 1 Cor. 15 because they are the climax of Paul's ongoing argument.

'Patronage and Commendation, Imperial and Anti-Imperial', by Efrain Agosto explores Paul's recommendations in various letters against a background of Roman patronage and formal introduction. Paul uses the rhetoric of Greco-Roman elites to establish a new system of hierarchy where success and debt are determined by the merits of mutual Christian service. Such awakens strong speculation on Paul's motives for refusing financial support.

Erick M. Heen's 'Phil. 2:6-11 and Resistance to Local Timocratic Rule: *Isa theō* and the Cult of the Emperor in the East' explores the widely investigated 'Christ hymn' of Phil. 2. First, engaging questions on whether or not Phil. 2 offers a 'high Christology', Heen turns to how the themes of the hymn, particularly its glorification and exaltation of Jesus by God, reconstructs 'aristocratic passions for honors'. To ascend, to be exalted, Paul argues, one must first submit.

Finally, Jennifer Wright Knust offers 'Paul and the Politics of Virtue and Vice'. First describing Roman imprecatory rhetoric of moral failure, she next describes how social order – particularly moral uprightness – was thought to be established by the nobility of the emperor. Even depraved figures, such as Nero, were lauded as defenders of virtue. Paul's frequent descriptions of non-believers as sexually licentious, 'fornicators', and at the mercy of Sin are an implicit slur on the emperor's moral control.

Simon Price's response ends the collection. For Price, the central difficulty lies in how 'the papers in this volume take "politics" to mean the politics of the Roman Empire (not just of Rome). They also argue that Paul takes a very critical, even subversive, line in relation to Rome' (p. 175). Price, however, asks about the extent to which we can craft a 'Roman' context and the degree to which Paul could be called uniquely 'subversive'. Even laying aside key questions (as Price does and I will do here) about the ability to isolate, define, or describe 'politics' within a generic cultural matrix, the question remains: if there is no coherent 'Roman' culture or politics, can we actually say Paul is subversive? Price establishes in more concise language and knowledge of antiquity than I could or do possess, the real concerns for how Roman rhetoric actually reflects complex cultural dynamics across the Empire as a whole.

Surely, Jews and Christians (though those groups may be preserved best in the data) were not the only 'resistors' of Roman agendas and ideas. True enough, none of the essays in this volume explicitly argue differently. Still, Price observes: 'It follows from all this that it is misguided to assume at the outset that the context (or even a context) in which Paul should be set is that of Rome. The world of Augustan court ideology is very remote from the world of the eastern cities of the Roman Empire' (p. 181).

My own questions: What is the role of hybridity in the constructions of sub-alterity and alterity that are assumed in this volume and how would these hybridisations address Price's concerns? Is Paul reacting to 'Rome' or to already hybridised notions of Rome? Is there such a thing as an unhybridised 'Roman-ness'? Are Paul's arguments similar to those which other groups promoted, which changed the fabric of being 'Roman' in time? What are the relationships of mimicry, mockery (in Bhabhan terms) or mimesis (per Said) in Paul's use but alteration of Roman rhetoric and assumption? Is there more significance to this in understanding Paul as socio-political 'deviant' or 'subversive'? How do they fundamentally alter any coherence or confidence in Pauline theology, ancient communities of Jesus-followers, or protest in any terms at all? How do these questions impact any coherent pursuit of what is 'high' and 'low' in culture?

Price ultimately concludes, 'Paul certainly needs to be set in part in relationship to the contemporary Gentile world, and certainly has "political" points to make. As this volume shows,

Paul's "political" points are not focused on Rome itself, but on the local structures of power (at whose apex was the reception of Rome), and his critiques were not narrowly political, but encompassed broader aspects of local social and religious values' (p. 183). I could scarcely agree more (though I might ask how much we can distinguish 'Gentile' from 'Jew' in Paul's communities). Still, it hardly seems fair to critique a volume because it raises provocative questions and opens new potential. *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* is not the final word, but is does not seem intended to be. Instead, it offers rich potential for new models for reading of Paul, potential which could participate in a complete re-imagining of both 'Roman-ness' and 'Paul' in New Testament studies. The book's essays are very focused, brief, and clearly followed. They will provide very fine conversation starters / partners for both students and mature scholars of Paul, the earliest Christian contexts and the socio-political environment of the early Roman Empire.