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Why the Roman empire was insignificant to Paul  
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I am delighted to have this opportunity for debate with Tom Wright, not only because we are old friends (we go back some 28 years), but also because I regard Tom's work on this topic much the most balanced of all those who are working in the 'Paul and Empire' coalition. Along with many others, I have become increasingly alarmed at the wayward readings of Paul that have emerged from this group in recent years, especially when Paul's statements are taken as code. Having used James Scott and postcolonial theory in my work on Josephus, I know a little about 'hidden transcripts' and 'sly civility' – and I think I know where these theoretical tools do and do not fit. Tom's approach is more measured, more comprehensive and more theologically developed than most, but I still consider it fundamentally wrong; so it is the strongest member of the coalition against whom I pit myself today.

Let me start by clearing some decks and by indicating a number of points on which I am entirely in agreement with Tom. Since rhetoric often caricatures opponents, I wish to make clear immediately where the battle lines do and do not lie. First of all, I entirely agree with Tom that Paul's discourse, and the discourse of most in antiquity, does not recognise the boundary between 'religion' and 'politics', as we use those terms today. As I shall make clear, I do not consider Paul an apolitical figure promoting a privatised, spiritualised pietism, but a community builder whose gospel permeates all spheres of life, including the public and the political. I agree with Tom that Paul is very interested in power, but that he does not lie neatly on either the right or the left of the political

spectrum as we have constructed it. I also agree that Paul's gospel is deeply antithetical and confrontational; he knows of two kingdoms in sharp antithesis to one another (Rom 5), of the reign of Christ which is nullifying his enemies (1 Cor 15), and of the cross of Christ that both causes and demonstrates the fundamental distinction between 'the world' (or 'this age') and the new creation (1 Cor 1-2; Gal 6.14-15). I fully endorse Tom's attempt to integrate Paul's 'political' thought into the rest of his theology, and his resistance to attempts to deJudaize Paul's theology by some members of the coalition. Like Tom, I think Rom 13.1-7 is authentic and genuinely means what it says (i.e., it is not ironic discourse). On the historical front, I agree with Tom that we should learn from classical scholars that the imperial cult was extremely important for most of Paul's contemporaries, in festivals, games, statues, coins, temples, and calendrical structures, even though, also under instruction from the classicists, I would want to give this picture a lot of nuance, expecting different kinds of imperial cult, in different places, at different times, with different effects, at different social levels. For the purposes of this argument, I will even agree with Tom that some of Paul's language regarding *euangelion*, *sōter*, *kyrios*, *parousia*, *eirēnē*, and the like, could have been heard by Paul's hearers/readers as analogous to the language used in imperial propaganda, though I think that the case has often been overstated and so far lacks evidence that anyone in antiquity, Christian or otherwise, heard it in this way.

But the question we are discussing today is not how Paul's gospel could have been heard, but how he meant it, and in particular how he framed it and focused it. Tom reads Paul's theology as intended to counter the propaganda claims of the Roman empire, to parody and upstage Caesar and to undermine the imperial cult; and that although this is

not the only thing Paul is doing, he does have this target especially and particularly in view. Tom finds this assault on Rome sometimes explicit, often implicit in Paul's language and narrative, and occasionally (e.g., in Phil 3) in code. I think, to the contrary, that Tom is hallucinating, that there is no evidence that Paul had the Roman empire or the imperial cult particularly in view, and that, better understood, Paul's theology is deeply political but in a way that makes Rome not a central player in the history of the world, but a bit part, a member of a largely undifferentiated crowd, in a drama governed by much greater and more pervasive powers. So, let me set out my case first in negative then in positive terms.

1. There is no evidence that Paul accords the Roman empire or emperor any special or significant role in the drama of history. Let us start by noting a few absences. Paul never refers to Roman governors, or to any Roman emperor by name, though he does once refer to King Aretas and is clearly not averse to naming rulers (2 Cor 11.32). He never refers to any Roman deities or to Caesar or Rome as objects of worship. If he had Roman citizenship, as Acts maintains, Paul never refers to it, either positively or negatively, despite providing much autobiographical detail. Although he refers frequently to the death of Christ, and very often to the cross, he never connects this with Rome or identifies this as a Roman punishment: it is the Jews who killed Jesus in 1 Thess 2.14, and the nameless and generalised 'rulers of this age' in 1 Cor 2.6, 8. If the cross is a scandal, as in 1 Cor 1-2, its offence is drawn out in relation to Jews and Greeks, or undifferentiated 'Gentiles', never in relation to Romans in particular. Paul's own imprisonments and punishments, including incarceration in the praetorium and being

beaten with rods (Phil 1.13; 2 Cor 11.25), are never attributed by Paul to Roman authorities: he is endangered by his own *genos* and by *ta ethnē* in 2 Cor 11.26, but never specifically by Romans. Although Paul speaks frequently about powers, authorities and rulers (as in Rom 8; 1 Cor 15; Rom 13; and, if we allow it, Col 1 and 2), these are always anonymous, and never described in ways that suggest specific identification with Rome. Lest we think that all this silence is suspicious, that there is an unnamed ‘you know who’ or ‘you know where’ that Paul cannot dare to name, we should note that he can speak about Rome (though only in Rom 1.7, 15), and that he does refer to Caesar (though only when speaking of believers in Caesar’s household, not with reference to cult or empire, Phil 4.22). In other words, there is no conspiracy of silence, but also no specification of Rome on the countless occasions when Paul could have spoken of her empire, her rulers and her cult. All those ‘and especially Caesar’ clauses that Tom uses in exegeting the target of Paul’s polemics, are supplements to the text, additions and specifications not made by Paul himself.

I shall pass over quickly one tactic Tom has used to get round this evident weakness in his case. By appeal to Richard Hays’ criteria, he finds reason to detect ‘echoes’ of the Roman empire all over Paul’s text, even when the Romans and their emperors are not named. But whatever one makes of those criteria there is an obvious and fatal flaw here: Hays is proceeding from the said to the unsaid, from numerous and explicit citations of Scripture to echoes that surround and supplement that solid sound of citation; Wright is working from nothing explicit in the text, from thin air to even thinner. The Haysian methodology is simply inapplicable to Tom’s case.

At this point, Tom and most others in the coalition start speaking of ‘code’: Paul does not speak openly about Rome because he speaks in covert terms, via a hidden transcript that is not, because it cannot be, explicit or public. I have to admit this whole scenario strikes me as not only unwarranted but absurd. There is not a single hint in the text that Paul’s words are meant with a second meaning, or in reference to something else, except in relation to one quite other matter, the Apollos and Paul comparison in 1 Cor 3-4 (see 1 Cor 4.6; I am expecting a political reading of that passage very soon. Tom’s reading of Phil 3.1 (where Paul says ‘to write the same is safe for you’) as hinting at a coded message, seems to me exegetically unsupportable and wholly unnecessary. Since we find the same pattern of non-reference to Rome in all of Paul’s letters, we would have to take them all as containing some hidden transcript, not just this or that one written from prison. But why on earth would Paul need to write every letter in code? The situations James Scott analyses are where subordinate peoples speak in public, before and to their landlords or rulers, and where they have to be discreet and indirect lest they end up in serious trouble; as he notes, they articulate freely what they really think among themselves and where no double-speak is necessary. Paul’s letters are private communications among small and largely back-street communities, carried by trusted friends. There were no secret police in Paul’s day opening and scrutinizing mail, and one would need very powerful and very persistent foes to harry early Christians to the extent of searching their correspondence for signs of political insubordination. Is there any parallel to this, even in the much later periods of state-orchestrated persecution of the church? The one parallel Tom regularly cites, Philo’s tractate on Joseph, as interpreted by Goodenough, is a chimera; Niehoff and others have shown that Goodenough’s reading

of this text, as a coded attack on Roman governors, is quite unfounded. Of course, people had to be careful what they said about Nero or any living emperor if they stood anywhere near the public eye. But what would Paul be saying that needed to be coded? That Caesar is not God or son of God? Philo said so openly and more or less directly to the emperor's face! That Roman governors and their agents, such as Pilate, were responsible for terrible miscarriages of justice? Josephus says that time and again, in documents that were genuinely public, and even presented to emperors! That the empire brings as much injustice and war as justice and peace? Even Tacitus, in the heart of the establishment, can see and say that in a widely read history of the empire. That one should not take part in the imperial cult? Paul says that clearly enough in his blanket ban on worshipping *eidōla*, and Josephus, who tiptoed quite carefully round this subject in his tractate *Against Apion*, still found it possible to castigate the imperial cult as 'a means that is useful neither to God nor to human beings' (2.75). This image of Paul, as too afraid to say what he thinks, strikes me as both bizarre and unnecessary; since Paul expects 'persecution' both for himself and for his converts, he is hardly going to shade the gospel to avoid it. And if he really thought the letter to the Philippians might be intercepted and read by hostile authorities, what on earth is he doing blowing the cover of Christians in Rome by sending greetings from believers in the household of Caesar (4.22)? Until someone gives me convincing reasons for why he had to cover his meaning in coded terms in every letter he wrote, I will stick to what is on the lines of Paul's letters and not what is supposedly between them. We should learn from the history of exegesis, from the Valentinians onwards: once you start looking for code in Paul you can end up just about anywhere you want.

So what do we do with the apparent mismatch between our reading of Paul's context, in which Roman power looms everywhere and the imperial cult dominates the horizon, and the near silence on specifically Roman power and religion in Paul's letters? At base, Tom's argument works by inference: the Roman empire was so important, Paul must have said something specifically about it; other Roman-era Jews did so, and why should Paul be different? So Rome and Caesar must be somewhere in Paul's letters; we just have to adjust our spectacles and we will surely see them. And, of course, if we are determined to find the Roman empire, we will surely discover it, by one means or another. The specifically counter-imperial message that emerges from this reading is just possibly one way in which his letters might have been received. But as an interpretation of Paul's meaning and Paul's intent, it is pure hallucination on the part of Tom and his fellow coalitionists. You know the story of the little boy in the crowd, watching the emperor as paraded down the street in his supposedly new clothes; he was bold enough to say, 'but the emperor is naked'. I feel a bit like that little boy, only in this case, when I am bidden to watch the emperor walking around Paul's letters, I rudely blurt out, 'but I see no emperor!' 28 years ago, you taught me, Tom, in reading the New Testament to pay very close attention to what is actually there, and not to read in theologies or history-of-religions backgrounds that had to be imported into the text. I learned well from you during those two enthralling years of Cambridge supervision, and I have come back to remind you of your lesson!

So where do we go from here? We may agree that the Roman empire was of supreme importance to the Romans themselves and many of their subjects; we may even agree that

many Jewish texts react to it in one way or another (though I think there is far more diversity than Tom allows). But what if Paul perceives his context and history in very different ways? What if he has his own peculiar perception of the world, on this as on so many other matters? What if the event that dominates history for Paul is not the arrival or spread of the Roman empire but the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and the new creation that these events inaugurate? And what if that event changes not only the sequence of history, but also, and more importantly, Paul's understanding of it? We need to go back to Paul's letters and really attend to his vision of reality, rather than import our own, or assume that he saw things much like his contemporaries. Hence I move now to the more positive aspect of my argument.

## 2. The Drama of History According to Paul

Pauline theology, rightly understood, concerns the subversive power of divine grace which creates and empowers new communities of social and political significance. These communities (churches) represent the advance of the gospel on a conflicted world stage, where the main players are what Paul calls 'powers' (*archai* and *dynameis*): on the one side, the Spirit and grace, on the other, Sin, Death and the Flesh. The Roman empire is not itself one of these powers, because they operate across all levels simultaneously – individual, social, political, cosmic; like any empire, it may be co-opted, in whole or in part, into the ranks of the sons of darkness, but only as part of an undifferentiated mass whose identity is determined by its allegiance to powers of far greater influence. In fact, I shall argue, Paul's most subversive act, vis-à-vis the Roman empire, was not to oppose

or upstage it, but to relegate it to the ranks of a dependent and derivative entity, denied both a name and a significant role in the story of the world.

Let me clarify three things before I proceed. First, let me define what I mean by ‘political’ (the term is banded about loosely in current discussion). **When I speak of the political, I refer to the play of power in the social sphere, both within a community, which stands under some governance or authority, and in the relationship between a community and its wider social context.** Paul’s theology is always directed towards the formation of community, and he expects his churches both to be governed (by the law of the Spirit of life, Rom 8.2) and to have some genuine impact on the world they inhabit; he leaves open but implicitly unlimited the spheres to which they penetrate, under the Lordship of Christ, to whom every knee will bow. Secondly, Paul can apply several political metaphors to the churches, as communities that experience and exercise power. They can operate as a *sōma*, they have a *politeuma*, and they are named *ekklēsiai*, all terms with political connotations. It is important to note that Paul’s use of these terms does not in itself denote an oppositional antithesis in relation to other communities bearing such names: the church as household of God does not stand in necessary opposition to all other households, **and the *ekklēsia* of God does not automatically line up against the local civic *ekklēsia*, although it makes a claim to a higher status and issues a higher call on its members’ loyalty.** Thirdly, we should note the peculiarity of Paul’s vision of the world in his depiction of powers such as Flesh and Death, the latter the last enemy which the rule of Christ will conquer (1 Cor 15.24-26). We are at a loss how to categorise these: if we call them cosmic, it sounds like they are somehow ‘otherworldly’, whereas they operate very much in human lives on the earthly stage. If we call them

‘anthropological’ we lose the sense that they cover the whole gamut of existence, from the sin of lust, to social disintegration, to the corruption and decay that infests the whole cosmos. To call them ‘mythical’ would be to fail to register the challenge that they pose to our normal, common-sense but perhaps deeply self-deceptive modes of perceiving the world and the powers that operate within it. Thus with Paul’s talk of powers we have to reckon with comprehensive features of reality, covering all levels and dimensions of existence, described in terms that break our normal categories and classifications. Following the Greek term *archai* I shall label this mode of world-description ‘archic’. These entities are both the principles behind and the powers over every sphere of life: in this sense, there is nothing in this world that is not ‘archic’, lining up on one side of the battle or the other.

If we ask about Paul’s perception of *imperium*, we may reasonably begin with a passage that makes heavy use of *basileuo* language, Rom 5.12-21. Here Paul describes the overthrow of the reign of sin by the reign of grace (5.21), and sets against the reign of death ‘those who have received the overflow of grace and of the gift of righteousness, who will reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ’ (5.17). The *dynamis* that has reconfigured the world in Christ is the grace that sweeps aside old divisions and old antinomies, crossing ethnic, social and political barriers; in the process, of course, it has set up new antinomies, new battle lines that also cut across the normal social boundaries recognised by historians and social analysts. Where Paul had formerly seen the basic division in humanity in ethnic terms, between Jews and Gentiles, he now sees the world divided quite differently, between those who are being saved and those on the way to destruction (1 Cor 1.18-25). Where we divide the world into historical periods and

ethno-political units, the Hellenistic or Roman eras, the Seleucid kingdom or the Roman empire, Paul sees no interesting and no archic differences between Romans and Greeks, only the divide between the *kosmos* and the *kaine ktisis*. As 1 Cor 1 and 2 Cor 5 make clear, what creates this division is the crucifixion of Christ: in shattering the old classifications of culture and power, it divides the world anew around the event of Christ. The political effect of this event is the establishment and development of new communities of gift-sharing love, social embodiments of grace, where all members are engaged in projects of mutual construction. Because they are not only modelled on, but participate in the event of the cross, these communities have a radically new understanding of power, whose special characteristic is not force or compulsion, but the service of the other, practised by all parties. Because these communities are controlled by the love of Christ, they cannot return evil for evil, but continually look for ways to turn evil into good; and because they welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed them, they strive towards peace in humility, not warfare or the balance of fear. These Christ-shaped communities form a stark contrast to the socio-political alternatives prevalent in the *kosmos*: they stand as a sign against, and a bridgehead into, the realm of Sin and Flesh in all its manifestations. There were undoubtedly many aspects of the Roman empire that Paul considered fleshly and sinful, but there were many fleshly aspects of all nations, Jewish and Gentile, and many sinful aspects of the church itself. The battle line between Flesh and Spirit does not pass neatly between the Roman empire and the rest, because this archic division is both pervasive and comprehensive, affecting the whole of humankind and the whole of history.

These church communities owe allegiance, of course, only to their Lord, or rather, as Paul's complex theology would put it, to one Lord and one God. They cannot admit worship of any *eidōla*, not because the idol-object is other than a mere block of metal or stone, but because behind it stand the *daimonia* which seriously challenge the rule of Christ. Paul never names any of these *eidōla*, not because he has never heard of Artemis or Dionysus, but because they all represent, at base, the same thing: the deflection of worship from the Creator to *daimonia*. He was no doubt familiar with the Lord Serapis and the God Jupiter, and no doubt also with the Lord Caesar and the deified emperors, living or dead. But the emperors and their cult are simply further items in a general category of 'many lords and many gods', no more and no less significant than any other. Paul is well aware of the social cost for his converts in 'turning from idols to the true and living God', whether those 'idols' be civic or imperial deities; but there was no reason to single any out since their worship all belonged, in his construction of reality, to a single phenomenon called *eidōlatria*.

Although the present contest is certainly intense, fought out at every level from inner temptation to social conflict to cosmic warfare, Paul knows that the victory won in the cross and resurrection has sealed the fate of the opponents of Christ. With a striking use of the present tense, he declares that the form of this world is passing away (*paragei*) and can assure believers that 'the night is far gone, the day is at hand' (13.11). In the wake of the cross of Christ, the 'rulers of this age' are being nullified or deactivated (*katargoumenoi*, 1 Cor 2.6), as is the whole structure of the present state of affairs (1 Cor 1.28). These rulers, we note, are nameless and undifferentiated, because what matters about them is not whether it was this king or that governor who crucified the Lord of

glory, but that they belong to ‘this age’, whose obsolescence and inadequacy is defined by the work of God in Christ. Their defining characteristic is not that they are Roman, or Hellenistic, or Jewish or whatever: when we hear that they are rulers of ‘this age’ that is all we need to know, because we then know that and how they are on the wrong side, and that and how they are being deactivated by Christ. In the midst of this crumbling present age, believers can live to their Lord in every sphere of life, since he is the Lord of the cosmos in every dimension, and the only Lord who will last. With the *hōs mē* policy of involved detachment (1 Cor 7), they know that only the work of the Spirit will survive the collapse of the present evil age; what is of the flesh, even in their own lives, will be burned up, but they will sow to the Spirit in every dimension of their existence – personal, social and political – as the imminent harvest will be rich. In their worship, they anticipate that eschaton, celebrating the grace that has already begun to reconquer and reconstitute the world.

If we put this in narrative terms – a mode especially favoured by Tom – we may imagine ourselves faced by two alternative stories. In the normal world of experience, as we walk the streets of any city in the Roman empire, we hear the story of a defective world rescued by the arrival of the Roman empire, whose saviour deities, the Roman gods and Roman emperors, delivered the warring nations from their strife and insecurity, and whose benign control of trade and borders protects a newly installed era of peace and prosperity. This is the story we have dinned into our ears repeatedly through imperial propaganda, eagerly adopted by local dignitaries who promote Rome’s interests to foster their own. But let us imagine that we meet Paul in this street and that he invites us into a house of a believer, which we find to be arranged like a theatre. Here we are invited to

sit and watch a play called 'The Drama of History'. As we take our seats and pick up our programmes, we turn to the listed *dramatis personae* and are astonished to find that the main characters in the narrative to be staged are not 'the emperor' or 'the Roman empire', but oddly named powers such as Spirit and Flesh, Life and Death. The play purports to depict a comprehensive account of reality. It has not left certain dimensions, such as the political or historical, out of consideration: everything is here, just under unfamiliar names. The play is about a conflict – that much at least is familiar – but it is not a conflict between the Roman empire and its barbarian foes, nor between the church and the Roman empire; in fact, neither the programme nor the costumes allow us to identify any of the figures on stage as distinguishably Roman. All over the stage, impelled by grace and energised by the Spirit, the children of light are engaged in continual conflict, but their foes, Satan, Flesh or Death, come at them from all sides and in many different shapes. At one moment we see Satan looking a bit like a Roman governor, preventing the movements of an evangelist, but at another he takes on the guise of an angel of light, indeed of an apostle in the church, who needs to be unmasked before he does further damage. At another moment a deceptive cry arises from a crowd of unbelievers on stage, 'peace and security', and we jump in our seats convinced that we have heard the voice of Rome. We hurriedly open our programmes again, to see if we missed the name of the character 'Roma' in the *dramatis personae*, but no, it was not there, nor was there any figure labelled 'you know who'. We look up again to see who made that cry, and find they are buried away in a large, undifferentiated and unnamed crowd called 'the people of darkness' or 'the rest'; it was clearly not significant that the voice we heard had a Roman accent. When we look again at the drama we notice, out of the corner of our eye,

that there are stage-hands constructing and shoring up the stage, and that some of these, in the category of *exousiai*, wear the clothes of various nations, including Greeks and Romans. They are there, it seems, to sustain the conditions under which the drama can unfold, and in that sense they support the good. But since their ethnicity and historical identity is not germane to the drama or even to its scenery, they are listed in the programme only in small print, as *diakonoi theou* (Rom 13.1-7), not as Roman officials or Roman emperors.

The drama concerns the story of the gospel, as it advances on the contested terrain of the world. **The chief characters are Christ, the son of God, and the archic entities we described above, mysteriously working not only behind but within every individual life, every human institution and every suprahuman power.** The advance of the gospel is everywhere in danger and frequently frustrated, but we know that the life it imparts is as indestructible as the risen Christ, and that even the most terrible enemy on the stage, Death, is doomed itself to die. Indeed we get a strong sense that forces of darkness, though presently dominant, are in decline, that the night sky that looms over the stage may be lightening a little in the East; and we cannot help noticing that the children of light keep celebrating the victory of their king by faith, even before it is fully visible and fully enacted.

When we emerge from this play, into the bright light of the street, the first thing we see is an enormous statue of the deified Augustus, standing 10 feet high in front of the most magnificent temple in town. And we are apt to be disorientated and confused. Did we miss something inside there, watching that play? **Surely this massive fact standing before us must have been represented in some equally massive role within the Pauline**

drama. We search our memories and reread the programme, to no avail, but are lucky to catch Paul himself outside the believer's house, clearly loitering with intent. 'Brother Paul,' we say, with some anxiety in our voice, 'surely you were not so naïve and so pietistic as to miss this huge reality staring us in the face out here in the street? What did I miss in the programme notes or in the costumes on stage? Where was the central character, Caesar?' And Paul, smiling, but not without a hint of frustration, asks us whether we stayed awake while we watched the play – not because we missed the big part played by Caesar strutting across the stage, but because we have clearly not yet seen reality as the play describes it. From the moment of the crucifixion of Jesus, Paul reminds us, we know nobody *kata sarka* (in normal human terms); even if we once knew Christ in those terms, we know him thus no longer; so if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has passed, beyond the new has come to be (2 Cor 5.16-17). The play has invited us into a different, a distinctive and a new epistemology. Paul is not blind, he just sees differently. Of course he sees the huge statue of Caesar, but he sees through it, and within it, and within myriad other social realities on and around the street, the archic powers that really matter and that are really at work. When you see the world aright, Paul insists, you realise that Rome's empire never was, is not now, and never will be a significant actor in the drama of history. It is not significant because its agency is derived and dependent; it is not itself an archic force, only sometimes co-opted by archic powers, divine or Satanic, for one role or another in the wider drama. There is nothing at all significant about it being Roman – nothing new, nothing different, nothing epoch-making. And then as we walk away pondering this claim, past the colossal statue of Augustus, it slowly dawns on us that Paul's way of viewing the world is the most

subversive of all. Where we had expected the play to depict the battle against Rome, with the Roman empire centre stage and prominent in the programme – if not fully named, at least under some pseudonym or code as ‘You Know Who’ – Paul had declined to accord it any such significance. And if he did not name or spotlight Rome in his play, it was not because he thought it harmless or because he considered politics irrelevant, but because whatever agency Rome has is dependent, subordinate, derivative and limited. Rome does not rule the world, or write the script of its history, or offer anything new, or constitute anything unique. Its grand claims have been most effectively denied and subverted by Paul not by direct challenge, but by subsuming Rome into the undifferentiated crowd of ‘the rest’ (*hoi loipoi*), and by placing here, even in her supporting role for the conditions of life, under the anonymous title, *diakonoi theou*. If Rome acts against Christ and against his followers, it is not because she is Rome, but because she has been co-opted by ‘this age’ and has been made a servant of Death. As we walk past the plinth of the deified Augustus, we realise that Paul’s play, Paul’s cross-formed epistemology, may after all be true; and if it is, it constitutes the deepest insult that Augustus and his successors have ever received.

### Conclusions

I have tried to enter Paul’s world as Paul saw it, because our task here this afternoon is not to ask what modern scholars think about the power of Rome, nor what ancient pagans or Jews thought about the Roman empire, nor even what the recipients of Paul’s letters might think about such topics, accustomed as they were to think in the common categories of antiquity. Our task is to examine how Rome does or does not figure in

Paul's world, the world as Paul saw it, fully realising that Paul saw the world in what were, by ancient standards, highly idiosyncratic ways. I think if we were watching a play staged by Luke we would see a rather different drama, closer to the common-sense perspective of the Roman world, and if we were to watch that produced by John of the Apocalypse, we would see a figure central stage clearly identified, in apocalyptic symbols, as the Roman empire itself. Philo's would be yet another, and Josephus' likewise. We cannot harmonise these or insert one into the other. Paul's is a highly distinctive vision of reality, and precisely because it is so radical and so distinctive it is catching the attention of contemporary secular political theorists such as Agamben and Badiou who find Paul politically extremely exciting, but do not find any simple anti-Roman propaganda in Paul, either on or between the lines.

I consider, then, that Tom's reading of Paul is fundamentally misshapen. He has taken his expectations of Paul from the street and its imperial-dominated scenery, and imposed upon Paul's drama a rubric and a structure quite alien to it. Ironically, the framework of his reading of first-century reality is much closer to that of Rome than to that of Paul: like Rome, he insists on attributing to the Roman empire a central role in history, he insists on the importance of the emperor and that his agency was so powerful that it needed to be parodied or upstaged by Christ. In so doing, I submit, by Pauline standards, he massively promotes the emperor and massively demotes Christ. It is hard for me to say this to my bishop, but I believe he is reading reality *kata sarka* and not *kata Christon*.

I think my own reading of Paul is not only far more satisfactory, but also, ironically, far more subversive to the claims of the Roman empire. On my reading, we

do not need to keep supplementing Paul's statements with phrases like 'and especially Caesar', nor do we need to read Paul's letters as code. We can make perfectly good sense of Paul leaving Rome largely unnamed and unidentified, while insisting that Paul's gospel covers every dimension of life, including the political. We are untroubled by suspecting that Roman officials may operate in one place under the rubric 'the rulers of this age' and in another under the title 'servants of God', because what matters is not that they are Roman but how their work is co-opted and subsumed under agencies far greater than themselves. And here we have a truly radical Paul who reads reality in ways deeply counter-intuitive both to us and to his contemporaries; by jolting our world-views under the power of the cross, he invites us to see the world quite differently. Suddenly we see Roman propaganda subverted precisely by not being challenged, but by being subsumed and relativised within a larger framework of explanation. And in this cruciform vision of the world we see the truly revolutionary potential of Paul, as a messenger announcing the biggest and the deepest change the world has ever known, the eruption of the new creation.