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**How Fantasy Comes True:
Paul between Political Realism
and Eschatological Fantasy**

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Abstract

In Romans 13 Paul toned down the revolutionary potential of Christianity connected with eschatological ideas like the kingdom of God. He was a kind of political realist and his spiritualizing tendency was not that of a social revolutionary. However, the spiritual change preached by Paul influenced attitudes and through them also social life far beyond the limits Paul could ever have imagined. In a sense, Paul's eschatological fantasy comes true via spiritual change.

Keywords

Apostle Paul, Authorities, Baptism, Equality, Law of the stronger, Romans 13

How Fantasy Comes True...

The invisible Kingdom of God, the realm of Messiah, ran into an undeniable conflict with the idea of unconditional obedience to Imperial authority (Ranke 1883: 182, 184; my translation).¹

With these words Leopold von Ranke, the “father” of modern history, constructed the political problem of early Christianity. Ranke extols Paul as the person who successfully united the new faith with the Empire. True, Romans 13:1–7 is a loyal paean to the divinely instituted state, in these verses Paul claims that God has instituted all governing authorities and that every person must be subject to them. Those who resist authorities resist God. Paul’s words have made a huge impact on the later Christian generations until the present day.

In this article I claim that Paul toned down the potential political “dynamite” of Christianity connected with ideas like the kingdom of God. He was a kind of political realist and his spiritualizing tendency was not that of a social revolutionary. I also claim that this is not the whole truth. The spiritual change preached by Paul influenced attitudes and through them also social life—even far beyond the limits Paul could ever have imagined. In a sense, an eschatological fantasy comes true via spiritual change.

Paul’s Openness Toward Roman Society

The kingdom of God is a multi-dimensional concept, the use of which in the Bible is impossible to systematize into one consistent whole. It is, like eschatological hopes in general, thought to be realized in the present age or in the future, in heaven or on earth, spiritually or materially, individually or collectively. Its visions of catastrophe and new hope have appealed to countless interpretations.²

While Paul seems to have a tendency of seeing eschatology as something that will be realized spiritually in heaven and individually in the future, the other dimensions are still visible (Räisänen 2010: 98-102). The revolutionary or even anarchic potential can be felt for example in the claim that Christ will give the kingdom to God after destroying “every ruler and every authority and power” (1 Cor 15:24). What is worse is that the conflict was at the heart of Paul’s faith: he preferred to know nothing

¹ All biblical citations in this article are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise indicated.

² For an overview, see Räisänen (2010: 79–113). Räisänen makes some references to the later adaptations.

except “Jesus Christ, him crucified” and it was “the rulers of this age” who “crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:2,8).³

However as far as we know the revolutionary elements of early Christianity never led to real deeds of rebellion. There is no evidence of Christians participating in the Jewish revolutionary movements.⁴ During the Jewish War (ca. 60–70s CE), Christians fled from the war zone (Eusebius 3.5.3; cf. Matt 24:15–16; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:20–21).⁵ Still, the conflict was from time to time realized in persecutions, of which we have evidence both in the early Christian and pagan literature.

Possibly the most famous case is the description of the beast in the Book of Revelation: “it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them” (Rv 13:7). Although the beast is a shadowy figure, in antiquity it is already identified with the Roman Emperors forcing Christians to offer in the imperial cult.⁶ Another example is the existing idiom in modern languages of carrying a cross. The idiom is inherited from the idea of *imitatio Christi*, the central motive of Christian ethics which emphasizes the readiness to suffer. In its scriptural roots (Matt 16:24; 10:38; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; 14:27) it was not just an exaggerated figure of speech.

In pagan sources, historian Tacitus describes the early persecution of Christians in Rome in the 60s CE. Although he maintains that Emperor Nero falsely scapegoated the Christians for the burning of the city, he adds that the Christians got what they deserved for their hatred for humankind (Tacitus *Annals* 15.44). Suetonius lists the persecution among Nero’s *good* deeds (Nero 16). Pliny the Younger, governor in Asia Minor, reports of his measures against the local Christians (10.96). Recent scholarship on these texts speak of Roman disgust and shock at the phenomenon of Christianity (Cook 2010: 2).

³ It is not absolutely clear that Paul is speaking of mundane authorities; one can also see them as celestial angelic or demonic powers. Schrage (2001: 173–74; 2008: 253–54) sees a double meaning in these verses. Jewett (2007: 552) sees Romans 8:32 as a possible critical note on mundane authorities, but he admits that this reading is not very well grounded. I prefer to see only celestial powers there.

⁴ Simon the Zealot among Jesus’ disciples (Luke 6:15) is possibly the closest candidate for a rebel, but we do not know if his nickname really refers to the rebellious Jewish movement or that he was just zealous in other meanings of the word. Note, for example, that Paul refers to his pre-Christian identity as “a Zealot of the traditions of my ancestors” (Gal 1:14; revised version of the NRSV), which meant persecuting Christians, not fighting the Romans.

⁵ In addition to the Jewish war in Palestine there was the so-called Bar Kokhba Revolt in the 130s CE. In the diaspora there was a vast Jewish uprising 115–117 CE. See, e.g., (Räsänen 2010: 28).

⁶ Actually there are two beasts in Rv 13. The first one is an Emperor, probably *Nero redivivus*, i.e., the arisen Nero (for more, see (Aune 1998: 713–80)). On the interpretations of the beast in the early church, see (Weinrich 2005: 196–203).

Yet one should not exaggerate the persecutions. Before the mid-third century CE they were sporadic and local, incited by members of the neighborhood rather than officials, who were often somewhat reluctant in their punitive measures after Christians were denounced to them. John the Seer, author of the Book of Revelation, seems to exaggerate some real experiences within its apocalyptic world view, providing the expectation of an eschatological war against the saints (e.g., Dan 7:21) (Räsänen 2010: 288–95). Christians continually bore a social stigma that increased the risk of negative encounters, but this stigma did not always lead to violent hostilities.⁷

The conflict between Christians and the society in which they lived was not the only truth. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, a contemporary of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny, highlighted Christians as moral examples, despite his lack of any deeper interest toward Christianity (Epictetus 2.9.19–21; 4.7.6).⁸ At the same time, the evangelist Luke at least thought that a Roman soldier could be a Christian (Acts 10). Only a century later was a Christian soldier not an anomaly, despite objections made by early Christian intellectuals like Tertullian (for example, in his treatise *De corona*).⁹

In actuality, in exaggerating the conflict between Christians and the Roman society, John the Seer was a Christian hardliner who drew an extremely clear line between “us” and “them.” He blames his Christian companions for their readiness to adjust themselves to the world and society they lived in. The target of his criticism was, among others, too liberal an attitude toward food sacrificed to idols (Rv 2:14, 20). The attitude under scrutiny is that of Paul who counted “idol food” among the *adiaphora*. One should give up eating “idol food” just in case it may insult people like

⁷ Paul Holloway notes that “scholars of early Christianity make a serious mistake when they focus on the ‘local and sporadic’ nature of early Christian persecutions as if tallying actual deaths allows one to somehow quantify the lived experience of lethal prejudice and ignore this much more fundamental and abiding problem” (2009: 36). Candida Moss possibly goes too far in diminishing the extent of persecutions in her *The Myth of Persecution* (2013).

⁸ In addition to Epictetus, there were other pagan philosophers giving a partly sympathetic picture of Christians (Huttunen 2013).

⁹ The Book of Acts presents the centurion Cornelius as the first non-Jewish believer. Whether the story is historically true or not does not matter. At least the author of the Acts (who is traditionally called Luke and composed his/her work ca. 100 CE) presents it as possible to be a Roman soldier and a Christian at the same time. The first archaeological evidence of Christians in the army is from ca. 230 CE. It is a prayer hall in a military building close to the camp of troops stationed in Megiddo. An inscription shows that there was a centurion among the “brothers”, see (Tepper & Di Segni 2006; Kyrychenko 2014; Huttunen 2014). *De Corona* is published as an English translation in Ante-Nicene Fathers 3 (1994 [1885–87]).

John, who still think such things make a difference (1 Cor 8:10).¹⁰ Thus, John the Seer himself witnesses that there was not necessary a conflict between Christians and the society.

Paul's openness toward pagan society is also reflected in his attitude toward the Roman Empire. As Heikki Räisänen states: "unlike the seer of Revelation, Paul, a middle-class cosmopolitan of sorts, apparently does not experience Roman rule as something from which he specifically needs to be redeemed" (2010: 101). Thus, the conflict with the Empire was undeniably a potential one, but it did not necessarily lead to an actual one. Despite occasional critical comments of the earthly rulers (see above), Paul was far from being a political dissident; the only passage where he intentionally discusses the relationship to state authority proves the opposite. In Romans 13:1–7 he explicated the relationship toward the Empire in a way that has steered attitudes since then in the Western world, in fact Paul's influence is already visible in the New Testament itself: sayings in 1 Timothy 2:1–2; Titus 3:1, and 1 Peter 2:13–14 are clearly dependent on Romans 13:1–7. Paul's words recur frequently in documents from then until the present day.¹¹

This fact makes Ranke claim that Paul's Epistle to the Romans is "a monument of the most important class." According to him, Paul gave room for the state and Emperor within the new faith, ascribing the existence of all, even the Emperor, to the monotheistic God. "Everything is united in Paul's thinking," Ranke extols, adding: "This is the sum of his apostleship" (Ranke 1883: 182,184; my translation).

Attempts to Avoid an Offense

Neil Elliot, one of the main representatives of the so-called anti-imperial reading of Paul was not as pleased about Romans 13 as Ranke.¹² The exhortation to subordinate all to the governing authorities "threatens to capsize every Christian liberative project," Elliot laments and refers to Romans 13:1–7 as a theological offense (Elliot 1994: 217). I will show that the reading strategies among both modern biblical scholars and the more general audience demonstrate the attempts to avoid the offense Elliot describes.

¹⁰ Paul's opinion is somewhat ambiguous in 1 Cor 8 and 10, but the main line is clearly liberal toward eating "idol food." For the issue in early Christianity, see Räisänen (2010: 285–88).

¹¹ 1 Tm and Ti are usually seen as later productions of the "Pauline school" in similar manner to some of Plato's epistles. For the dependence between 1 Pet and Rom, see, e.g., (Elliot 2000: 38). For the history of this influence, see, e.g., (Wilckens 2008: 44ff).

¹² For an overview on the anti-imperial reading of Rom. 13:1–7, see (Krauter 2009: 28–32).

Paul states that everyone should be obedient to the authorities who happen to be in power, because the authority is instituted by God. Moreover, in promoting good and resisting evil the authorities' use of the sword always serves a positive purpose. Although the politics of acknowledging earthly rulers was not without its predecessors in Judaism (Riekkinen 1980: 53–60), there is one atypical character which really threatens to ruin any critical attitude: the *unlimited* theological justification for the state.

The unlimited justification for the state in Romans 13 has always raised questions. One of the most proposed limitations is found in the fact that, according to Paul, the authorities promote good. This is thought to mean that only authorities promoting good should be obeyed. But this is not what Paul says, rather claiming that the authorities promote good without exception. But did Paul speak of earthly authorities at all? Scholars have noticed that the Greek words for authority (*exousia*, *archontes*) can also mean angelic powers. Thus, Paul does not necessarily speak of obedience to the state at all, or he speaks only of obedience to the angelic powers behind the state.¹³ In recent decades this angelic interpretation has been univocally dismissed (Krauter 2009: 11–12).

Interpreters have also searched for the limiting principle in the textual context of the epistle. As Paul admonishes Christians not to “be conformed to this world” in the beginning of his paraenetic part (Rom 12:2), scholars have claimed that this draws a line arguing for obedience (e.g., Jewett 2007: 732). But why so? We can also see that loyalty is the opposite of worldly unrest. We can also argue that those rebelling in this world are conformed to this world and its weapons. Thus, the reference to “this world” is too hazy to provide an interpretative key. It is also noted that shortly after his words on authorities, Paul reminds the readers of the imminent eschatological change (Rom 13:11–14)—which according to some readers relativizes the state authorities and obedience to them. It is more important to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13:14) than to obey the authorities. Possibly yes, but does it lead to any resistance? At least in 1 Corinthians the imminent end seems to lead to a conservative stance: everyone should remain in his or her social position without searching for change (1 Cor 7), it is meaningless to search for a change in a situation which is soon to disappear (Huttunen 2009: 26–36).¹⁴

¹³ This interpretation is mainly associated with Cullmann (1956), but it also appeared earlier, for example the famous Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer backed his resistance to the Nazi-regime with this interpretation (Wilckens 2008: 63–64).

¹⁴ It is also proposed that Paul stoically counted the authorities among *adiaphora* (Engberg-Pedersen 2006). This, however, would not necessarily lead to resistance any more than the idea of an imminent end. Moreover, Paul speaks of fear (*phobos*) as a motivation for obedience, while fear serves as a major category of vice for the Stoics.

Biblical scholars have also rightly sought to contextualize Paul's words within the political situation of his time. Scholars have supposed that Paul recommended loyalty because of this or that political disturbance, be it tax uprisings, the problems between Jews and Romans (cf. Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4; Acts 18:2), or between the Jews and the Christians. Thus, Paul's admonition would be situational rather than general.¹⁵ The main problem is that Paul hints at no situational factors.

Some scholars have now finally accepted the fact that the passage admonishes an unlimited loyalty toward the state authorities—just in order to explain that Paul could *never* have said or meant it. Some (e.g., Barnikol 1961) claim that the passage was not originally a part of the epistle, but is just an early addition to the text. No manuscript evidence backs this claim and the scholarly majority has rejected this theory (Jewett 2007: 789–90). In the so-called anti-imperial reading of Paul, it has been claimed that Paul's words constitute such exaggerated praise for the authorities that a wise reader cannot miss the irony, with Paul trying to undermine and subvert the social structures (e.g., Carter 2004).¹⁶ Unfortunately, the reading is anything but obvious, and I am not conscious of any ironic reading of Romans 13 before the “anti-imperialists.”

From the earliest days, the non-scholarly reception of Paul's words has also been a history of *limiting* the power Paul attributed to the authorities. 1 Tim 2:1–2 is an admonition to pray for the authorities in order to maintain peace for the Christians (cf. 1 Clem 61). Are the authorities not always as good as Paul assumes, in the sense that Christians must pray for peace from the authorities' side? Traditionally the authority ascribed to the state by Paul is limited by a reference to the *clausula Petri*: “We must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29).¹⁷ Similarly, Tertullian (*Scorp.* 14) sees that the authorities

For the Stoic theory of emotions, see, e.g., Brennan (1998). For the contrast between Paul's and the Stoic Epictetus' thought, see Huttunen (2009: 96). Ironically, Epictetus praises Christians for their habit of *not yielding* to fear before tyrants (*Discourses* 4.7.6; see Huttunen 2013: 243–47).

¹⁵ Krauter (2009: 12–15) and Harrison (2011: 271–72) have helpfully gathered these situational explanations.

¹⁶ For an overview on this reading with critical remarks, see (Krauter 2009: 28–32). Jewett (2007: 789–90) explains that Paul ascribes the power behind the authorities to the God of Israel, not to the Roman gods. He claims that this is subversive in terms of political theology. I, however, will add that this *theological* difference by no means limits the duty of obedience in Romans 13. See also Harrison's reading (2011: 308–23) which is anti-imperial, but finally comes quite close to my reading with its emphasis on Paul's realism (see more below).

¹⁷ The NRSV gives an alternative translation “than men” which is actually closer to the Greek (*anthrōpōis*). The translation “authority” is possibly in itself evidence for the fact that this verse is often read in parallel with the authorities in Romans 13. Acts 5:29 is just one variant of Socrates famous saying in Plato, *Apol.* 29d, which has a rich

are to be obeyed only within their own sphere. If they require authority on divine issues, a Christian should be ready for martyrdom.¹⁸ The same trend is visible in later times: Luther, who also refers to Acts 5:29 among other biblical verses, limits state authority to earthly issues and requires freedom of religion, which can, for example, be activated in the denial to yield up religious books (*Von weltlicher Oberkeit*, Luther 1900 [1523]: 265–71). This is actually how Ranke understood Paul: a Christian should have freedom of religion, while the sword will punish wrongdoers (1883: 184).

Immanuel Kant had a different route to limit the obedience to state authorities. He (1999: 370–72) prescribed obedience to authority, which through its laws represents the general will of the people. This is something, at least in my own Finnish tradition, that is still visible in the idea of specifically *legal* authority. It blocks out obedience to any kind of state authority. Only an authority based on a law can require obedience (Kant 1999: 370–72).¹⁹

The history of the passage's reception both among biblical scholars and other readers shows that the limiting principle, be it *clausula Petri*, law, or something else, have been constructed from outside the passage itself, betraying the failure of finding a limiting principle in the passage. Those rare persons who were happy with unlimited power could cite Paul's words without further commentaries. Thomas Hobbes, who ascribed unlimited power to the sovereign in society, cites Romans 13:1–6 in order to show that there is no excuse for disobedience to the "civil authority," not even a faith-based one (Hobbes *Leviathan* 3.42). Hobbes understood correctly, Paul does not draw any limits upon the authorities in Romans 13. He just presents that their limitless power promotes the good in all cases. It is therefore our task to make sense of it: how could Paul claim such a thing?

history of influence, e.g., in Epictetus: "When you come into a presence of some prominent man, remember that Another [that is: God] looks from above on what is taking place, and that you must please Him rather than this man" (*Disc.* 1.30.1; trans. W. A. Oldfather, LCL). For the use of Acts 5:29 in the interpretation of Rom 13, see (Wilckens 2008: 45).

¹⁸ See translation in Ante-Nicene Fathers 3 (1994 [1885–1887]).

¹⁹ Johann Vilhelm Snellman (1806–1881), a very influential philosopher in Finland, maintained that obedience to authority should be developed with an understanding of the rationality of national law. Pure obedience to authority would mean obedience to any kind of irrational statutes or random rulers (*Läran om staten* 18 = *Samlade arbeten* III, 341). Thanks to general conscription, most Finnish men have given an oath where they swear loyalty to the legal authority ("laillinen esivalta"/"laglig överhöghet"), the background of which is firmly rooted in the political situation at the beginning of the twentieth century (Huttunen 2010: 91–113).

Romans 13 and the Ancient Ethics of the Stronger

Scholars and other readers of Romans 13:1–7 have always noted its theological side: God has instituted the authorities. But what makes God’s institution *socially* visible? It is the execution of power, in that “those authorities that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom 13:1)? The authority makes itself visible in its capacity to violently suppress all resistance: rulers are *terror* to bad conduct, their *sword*²⁰ generates *fear* and they are *revengers*²¹ (Rom 13:3–4). Public approval for good conduct is a single exception in the midst of a series of violent and fearful measures.

Summarizing the motives to obey in Rom 13:5, to Paul one is under duress, *anankē*, due to wrath and conscience. Wrath clearly refers to the ruler bearing the sword who is literally a “revenger to wrath”: one has to obey for fear of punishment. It is more difficult to determine what duress caused by conscience is, conscience referring in one way or another to consideration. In this context, Paul seemingly refers to the understanding of the divine institution and rulers’ ability to crush the opposition: one should not obey purely out of blind fear, but also because one understands the situation. Paul is not putting forward any ideal of a ruler as did the ancient philosophers who discussed whether the king should, for example, be a living law in the state or honor gods. Neither is there any trace of the critical attitude towards rulers which is so important in the Hebrew prophetic books or in Deuteronomistic history.²² Paul is not speaking about what the powers *should* be, but what they really are and what is their ability to coerce. The recipients of Paul’s letter should consciously realize what “the powers that be” are. This is his political realism.

The reference to understanding means that Paul’s words make sense in the ancient mind—surely because they fit the moral code that enacted the relationship between stronger and weaker. To begin with, *Pax Romana* was built upon this code. As Virgil states: “You, Roman, be sure to rule the world (be these your arts), to crown peace with justice, to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud” (*Aen.* 6.851–853). It is the armed forces that pacify the world. In *Res Gestae*, Emperor Augustus proudly announces that he closed the temple of Janus “when peace had been achieved by victories on land and sea throughout the whole empire of the Roman people” (*Res Gestae* 13). The legions overpowering the

²⁰ “Sword” (*machaira*) does not refer to capital punishment (*ius gladii*), but to violent power in general (cf. Rom 8:35).

²¹ “Revenger” (*ekdikos*) can also be read as a particular official, but the idea of revenge is present in Rom 12:19.

²² For the philosophers’ discussions and the Jewish background, see, e.g., (Harrison 2011: 279–308).

provinces bring peace and justice.²³ This is not far from Paul's words concerning the sword.

But the Roman army was not only for warfare, also attending to the affairs of internal peace. This police work, however, was not so much aimed at protecting the people as it was in attending to the interests of the Empire (Campbell 2002: 88; Fuhrmann 2012: 8, 91, 119; Huttunen 2014). In cases of unrest "brute force was often expedient and effective, especially in dealing with ill-equipped townfolk" (Hubbard 2005: 423). In Paul's words, these forces compose "the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:4).

Teresa Morgan (2007: 63–67) has produced a fine sketch of popular morality in the early Roman Empire, covering a variety of sources such as fables and exemplary figures. The majority of the preserved fables deal with relations between the weak and the strong. In them, hierarchy is seen as natural: the weak are advised not to put themselves in the way of the powerful, but they can try to show themselves as being useful; respectively the strong should not destroy themselves by unwise treatment of their inferiors. The exemplary figures Morgan presents express *fides*, trustworthiness, toward persons of higher rank than themselves, but the whole society is interconnected: everyone is bound to those above and below (2007: 136, 142). State institutions are seen as moral authorities, especially the army, censorship, the magistracies and the law courts. The affinity to Paul's ideas is clear.

Morgan (2007: 274–99) shows the connection between popular morality and philosophy. On questions of weaker and stronger it was often disguised as universal law: "Let the stronger always prevail over the weaker" (Epictetus, *Disc.* 1.29.13, 19). The idea of this law goes back to Hesiod, who thinks that it is characteristic of animals, not of human beings. Human beings should not follow the path of violence but the path of justice rewarded by Zeus (*Op.* 210, 274–81).²⁴

Thus, Hesiod preferred justice to power. There is, however, a serious problem in differentiating between power and justice. This becomes visible, for example, in Epictetus' text, where he plays between the two meanings of the Greek words *kreissōn* and *cheirōn*: they can be understood in the sense of strength ("stronger"/"weaker"), but also in the moral sense ("better"/"worse").²⁵ Epictetus admits that out of ten who are physically stronger, the one subdued can be morally better. This also affords him an opportunity to criticize the authorities despite their predominance in

²³ For *Pax Romana* and its ties to such concepts as "freedom" and "safety," see (Dmitriev 2011: 368–77).

²⁴ For more examples of the law of the stronger, see (Räsänen 1992: 81–82).

²⁵ For more on *kreissōn* and *cheirōn*, see (Liddell, Jones, and Scott 2011).

physical force and coercion.²⁶ Paul, however, makes no divisions: those physically in power are also morally good.

In Plato's dialogues, the figures promoting the law of the stronger subjugate morality to power so that morality is what power says it is (*Resp.* 338e–339a and *Gorg.* 483a–484c). This relative morality was not accepted by Plato or Paul, as Paul did not relativize morality. The good the authorities promote (Rom 13:3–4) is the good he recommends to Christian in-group relations (Rom 12:9–10; 13:8) (Wilckens 2008: 31; Huttunen 2009: 97–98).²⁷

To my mind, the most illustrative parallel for Paul's thinking is Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*. In the so-called Melian dialogue, Athenians threaten to destroy the little city of Melos if the Melians do not surrender. The Melians remark in a Hesiodian manner that they believe the gods to be on their side because of their innocence. The Athenians answer boldly, "For the gods we hold the belief, and of men we know, that by necessity (*anankaia*) of their nature wherever they have power they always rule" (Thucydides 5.104–105). The Athenians follow this law they have found to be true and therefore believe in divine support.

This law of the stronger is well known in later times, as Epictetus shows. It also appears in a Jewish source, where Josephus tells that he advised Jerusalem to surrender as the city does not fight only against the Romans but also against God, who now rests over Italy. God's will is visible as there is "an established law, as supreme among the brutes as among men, 'Yield to the stronger' and 'The mastery is for those pre-eminent in arms'" (Josephus *Ant.* 5.378, 367). Paul shares this view: God is on the side of the powerful.

The Melian case is routinely presented as an example of the political realism thought to be immoral power politics.²⁸ This is not the case, however, as the stronger in ancient times are also bound by certain duties toward the inferior. The Athenians advise the Melians not to consider it disgraceful "to acknowledge yourselves inferior to the most powerful state when it offers you moderate terms" (Thucydides 5.111). This advice is presented as a piece of general wisdom: it is right to show moderation toward the inferior.

This moderate attitude toward inferiors is the moral code of a hierarchically structured reality, whereby in actuality the powerful need their subjects for their might and welfare. Melos was destroyed only as a fearful example of a rebel among the other inferior cities in the Athenian orbit. But as a general procedure the destruction of inferiors would destroy the

²⁶ For a further analysis of Epictetus' text, see (Huttunen 2009: 63–65). For Epictetus' partially critical view on authorities, see (Huttunen 2009: 83–92).

²⁷ Thorsteinsson (2010: 98–99) makes the same point but warrants that "it is hard to believe" that this would literally mean unlimited acceptance of the authorities.

²⁸ See, e.g. references provided by Crane (1998: 23n3).

Athenians themselves (Crane 1998: 291–93). Moderation toward inferiors was also the advice given to Romans in the previously quoted verse of *Aeneid*: “spare the vanquished and crush the proud (*parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*)” (*Aen.* 6.853).

This is also the moral code Teresa Morgan shows was present in the popular morality of the early Roman Empire. Everyone was in one way or another bound to those above and below. The powerful need the loyalty of the inferior. Therefore one can expect that loyalty toward the stronger will be approved. This was Paul’s idea in Romans 13: those loyal to their authorities will be approved, but those resisting the rulers will be destroyed.

James R. Harrison, who promotes the so-called anti-imperial reading, is ready to admit Paul’s realism. He points out that “Paul’s heavy emphasis on judiciously ‘fearing’ the authorities is [...] far-sighted acknowledgement of first century political realities” (2011: 313). Even in the end of his analysis of Romans 13, Harrison notes that Paul refused open resistance as a “tragic miscalculation regarding Rome’s determination to suppress all rebellion” (2011: 323). I am more suspicious about the anti-imperial “hidden transcript” Harrison finds in Romans 13, but I am ready to admit that Romans 13 is not the whole story of Paul’s political views.

The Fantasy Comes True

I have shown that Romans 13:1–7 is a christened version of common ancient ethics. It took as its starting point the prevailing social hierarchy with its violent basis, and also seems to be ruthlessly realistic in the sense that it discouraged all attempts to change society. However, as Ranke clearly saw, this is not all, as Paul’s teaching on authorities is also a reaction to the social critique at the heart of the Christian beliefs which Paul himself shared.

A person who wanted to become a member of the Christian community entered it through baptism, the initiation rite of this minor cult. As usual, initiation revealed the central beliefs of the cult. What is of interest in this article is the social dimension of the new faith. In the Epistle of Galatians, Paul declares: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27–28).

This maxim was seemingly a fixed part of the baptismal paraenesis. When it appears elsewhere in the New Testament, it is always combined with baptism (1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:11).²⁹ One can easily see that indifference

²⁹ Col 3:11 lacks the concrete reference to baptism, but the symbol of “clothing” in verses 3:9–10 is clearly a reference to baptism. “Baptism by immersion lent it-

to ethnic status lies at the heart of Paul's thinking, as he makes room for the non-Jews among the Christians; but what the baptismal paraenesis actually reveals is that indifference also applies with respect to other statuses within the baptized group as well.

Interestingly, Paul also refers to baptism shortly after delivering his teaching on authorities. At the end of chapter 13, he focuses on the imminent end of this era and emphasizes a correct lifestyle. "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ," he exhorts (Rom 13:14), clearly making a reference to baptism: one should live the life worthy of the one who is clothed with Christ (Jewett 2007: 827–28). Actually, it is life imitating the coming world after the eschatological turn as Paul explains earlier in the epistle.

In Romans 6, Paul strongly contends against the sins committed by Christians. He underlines baptism as an argument: Christians mystically died to sin with Christ when baptized. Then he makes the ethical conclusion: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom 6:5). What is interesting here is the *future* resurrection life projected onto the *present* as an ethical standard (Huttunen 2009: 148–49).

As the baptismal paraenesis shows, one of the cornerstones of this ethical standard is the lack of ethnic, status, gender or, I suppose—any other characteristics. Of course, this does not mean that the characteristics somehow disappear, but that they are just *adiaphora*. In this tendency, Paul comes close to the ethics of the Stoics, according to whom the world is organized by the divine *logos*, therefore considering even the social structure of the world as divinely instituted.

According to the Stoics every person occupies a social position at God's command. It is indifferent to a person what the position happens to be. What counts is to fulfil one's duties as an official or slave or any other position one happens to find oneself occupying. Every person is equal and different ranks are just like roles composed by the divine Playwright, therefore a Stoic slave-owner is not obliged to set his or her slaves free, but to treat them humanely: "Do you not remember what you are, and over whom you rule—that they are your kinsmen, that they are your brothers by nature?" (Epictetus, *Disc.* 1.13.4 slightly revised) (Huttunen 2009: 24–26, 45).³⁰

The analogy between Stoic and Pauline thinking is clear: social differences are *adiaphora*, but in reality they are not rejected. Interestingly, Paul admonishes everyone to remain in that social position he or she occupies—not even slaves should try to find their freedom (1 Cor 7:17–24).

self to the development of an imagery of 'garment symbolism': the candidate left his garments behind as he entered the water, and put on a fresh set of clothing when he emerged" (Wilson 2005: 250).

³⁰ On the Stoic idea of equality, especially between genders, see Grahm's profound study (2013).

The analogies with Stoic ideas and even technicalities are so distinctive in these verses that I refer to them as a Christian version of Stoicism (Hut-tunen 2009: 26–31).³¹

As inner conviction, Paul's Christianity makes no less impact than Stoicism. Paul's short epistle to a certain Philemon stands as witness to this. In the epistle, the slave Onesimus who was probably a runaway, is returned to his owner by Paul "no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother" (*Philem.* 16). Even though the short personal letter should not be read as an overall statement on slavery or even on the treatment of runaways,³² the human tone is distinctive and fits well with the baptismal paraenesis.

The reference to the baptismal paraenesis in Romans 13:14 is followed by an actual exhortation to those powerful in the Christian community: they should also accept "the weak in faith" among them without quarrel (Rom 14:1–15:7). In this case it is a question of weakness and strength in spiritual matters: the weak are scared by the "idol food" while the strong—amongst whom Paul counts himself—know that "nothing is unclean in itself" (Rom 14:14). This spiritual strength is parallel to the moral strength shown by the physically conquered person in Epictetus' example (see above). It is characteristic of an ancient mindset that people are classified by their strength—even in intellectual, moral, and spiritual matters.

Paul does not deny the classification between the weak and the strong in faith, in this sense he accepts a social hierarchy even within the Christian in-group. It is secondary, however, as both subgroups share the common interest to give glory to God: "Those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God" (Rom 14:6). One should just recognize each other's practices as differing outcomes of the same conviction.

In a reference to Romans 14, Alain Badiou claims: "Paul takes great pains to explain that what one eats, the behavior of a servant, astrological hypotheses, and finally the fact of being Jewish, Greek, or anything else—all this can and must be envisaged as simultaneously extrinsic to the trajectory of truth and compatible with it" (2003: 100). This is certainly true in Romans 14, but is an overstatement if presented as Paul's overall conviction, as Badiou tries to do.

Badiou wants to show that Paul was not promoting anti-Judaism or misogyny, but the true universalism which transcended all difference

³¹ Paul's words on slaves are understood also in the way that slaves should promote their emancipation when possible. If so, the parallel with Stoicism might be even clearer (Bonhöffer 1911: 171). However, in the above mentioned pages I have philologically argued against the interpretation that Paul would admonish the promotion of emancipation.

³² See the discussion by Glancy (2002: 91–92).

(Badiou 2003: 101–16).³³ To take the case of the Jews, we can read a lengthy discussion on them in Romans 9–11. It proves that Paul seriously intended to find a place for non-Christian Jews within salvation, but fluctuates between different solutions and ends up leaving the matter to God.³⁴ In the end, he could not find a universal solution, but his intention toward it is undeniable.

The limitation of Paul’s universalism is clearly revealed when his thoughts are compared with those of the Stoics. Runar Thorsteinsson (2010: 209) claims that “Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism are fundamentally similar in terms of morality or ethics,” but that only Stoics taught universal humanity. The Christian texts, in turn, “reserve the application of their primary virtue for fellow believers.” This is easily seen, for example, in Romans 13:8–10 where Paul exhorts the Christians to *mutual* love.

Paul is not wholly unconcerned with non-Christians, but the main line highlights in-group matters (Huttunen 2009: 71; Thorsteinsson 2010: 193–94). This is due to the fact that the equality of all people is closely tied to faith and baptism in Christ. Transcending the differences—say, between slaves and the free, is closely reminiscent of what the Stoics said but, contrary to them, the equality is not based on common humanity but in Christ. This is clearly visible in 1 Corinthians 7:17–24 (Huttunen 2009: 36).

Nevertheless, there really was a universal mission in early Christianity: to make disciples of all nations (*ethnē*) (Matt 28:19). This was also Paul’s mission as he believed himself to be “the apostle to the nations (*ethnōn*)” (Rom 11:13; trans. revised). That there is no independent humanistic interest toward outsiders is nothing but an understandable situation in a cult that projected all the good onto Christ. There was no freedom, equality, or brotherhood outside of Christ.

Christianity was just another small cult in Paul’s time, and the apostle just showed a slice of realism when accepting the empire as it was. What he could expect was a new order among those who had found the source of all good. In this sense, the fantasy could come true as far as it came true in the attitudes of the Christian in-group. On a more general level he could put trust only in Christ who will destroy “every ruler and

³³ It is revealing that Badiou claims that Paul did not accuse the Jews of deicide, which is true, but deceiving. Although Paul does not speak of deicide, he does ruthlessly blame Jews for being enemies of humankind and for murdering Christ (1 Thess 2:15). This is so heightened a claim that one is tempted to see it as an interpolation. There is, however, no manuscript evidence for this proposition. In the case of women, Badiou is more sensitive, admitting that Paul sometimes utters things that are unacceptable today, although “the only question worth asking is whether Paul, given the conditions of his time, is a progressive or a reactionary” (Badiou 2003: 104–16).

³⁴ An illustrative discussion on Rom 9–11, see (Räsänen 2008).

every authority and power” (1 Cor 15:24). While waiting for this divine revolution, it is better to realistically lead a quiet life under the powers that be and to “deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31). This is how Jacob Taubes (2004: 52–54) understood Paul—and rightly so. But the story did not end when Paul passed away. What he could not expect or even imagine is that the fantasy would come true at the practical level of social structures before the form of this world passed away.³⁵

At least in the case of slavery, attitudes gradually influenced society. Clement of Alexandria, an early Christian theologian ca. 200 CE, required a decrease in slave work. Although theologians usually admitted slavery as a matter of fact, it became more and more restricted, in a sense corrupting the system of slavery from the inside through an anti-hierarchical spirit. Surely, the development toward the end of slavery was not without backtracking, and the general prohibition of slavery was surely not only due to Christianity,³⁶ although it did have a significant role in that process (Klein 2000; Turley 2000).

It is difficult to imagine any serious Christian leader today who would share Paul’s opinion that slaves should not search for their freedom. At the level of the letter these modern Christians have put aside “what the Bible says.” Paul, however, also says that “we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit” (Rom. 7:6; cf. 2 Cor 3:6). He preached spiritual change, therefore we can legitimately ask if the one who follows his spirit is more his disciple than the one who follows his letters. From this spiritual point of view the limitations to Romans 13 can be justified, although going against the letters Paul wrote. The question to ask is: do such limitations not actually enhance Paul’s fantasy that there will be an end of “every ruler and every authority and power” (1 Cor 15:24)?

³⁵ Jewett (2007: 803) assumes that Paul consciously questioned the social structure of the Roman reality, but that he admonished loyalty to the authorities in order to enable the free proclamation of the gospel which, ironically enough, questioned the very authorities.

³⁶ That Paul’s ideal of equality among Christians was easily changed back to the ethics of the law of the stronger is illustrated by Clement of Rome, who wrote only a few decades after Paul: “Let each be subjected to his neighbor, according to the position granted to him. Let the strong care for the weak and let the weak reverence the strong. Let the rich man bestow help on the poor and let the poor give thanks to God, that he gave him one to supply his needs” (1. Clem. 38).

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