

LIBERATING SUBTEXT:

Rereading Romans 13:1-7 after James C. Scott for Liberation Theology

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Let every soul subordinate itself to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except by God, and the existing authorities have been put in their place by God. Consequently, whoever resists the authority resists what God has put in place. Such resistance will only bring down condemnation upon itself. For the rulers are not a terror for those who do good, but for those who do evil. Do you desire to be free from fear of the authority? Then do good deeds and he will commend you; he is a servant of God to your advantage. But if you do evil, be afraid—he is not wearing his sword for show. He is a servant of God, an avenger of wrath to the one who practices evil. Therefore, it is obligatory to subordinate yourselves, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. This also is precisely why you pay taxes, for God’s priests are constantly occupying themselves with this very thing. So give back everyone what is owed them: if a tribute is owed, give the tribute; if taxes, then taxes; if fear, then fear; if honor, then honor. (Rom 13:1-7, translation mine)

For centuries, ruling elites and their systems of domination have found an ally in these ostensibly unambiguous words from the mouth of the apostle Paul. As Robert Jewett puts it, Rom 13:1-7 “has provided the basis for propaganda by which the policies of Mars and Jupiter have frequently been disguised as serving the cause of Christ.”¹ Conversely, and not surprisingly, many liberation theologians have found something of an adversary in Paul, in their attempts to construct theologies of revolutionary social change. Franz Hinkelammert is representative here when he concludes that Paul is “not interested in inquiring about the nature of the existing authority or class structure.” For Hinkelammert, Paul knows only that “authorities are necessary.” Paul makes “no effort to ask whether a particular authority has been established by God or not. The issue is not one kind of authority or another. All authority has been established by God.” This divinely established authority is not any one particular authority but “authority as such.”² Since authority *as such* is divinely established, *every* authority is divinely established, whether that authority be just or unjust, benevolent or tyrannical. In Paul, according to Hinkelammert, there is no functional distinction. There is for Paul “no Christian political thought dealing with domination.”³

In this essay I will challenge readings of Paul such as Hinkelammert’s. It is my contention that the anthropological work of James C. Scott has provided a new and appropriate lens through which to read texts such as Rom 13:1-7, and that this lens will prove useful for liberation theologians who wish to use

¹ Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 803.

² Franz J. Hinkelammert, *The Ideological Weapons of Death: A Theological Critique of Capitalism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 146.

³ *Ibid.*, 152.

Paul in service of theologies of revolutionary social change. I will begin with a brief summary of the work of Scott, introducing the reader to his categories of public and hidden transcripts and their relevance to New Testament studies. I will then look at two separate attempts to apply Scott's categories to Romans 13—those of T. L. Carter and Neil Elliott respectively. In conclusion I will attempt to elucidate what relevance a rereading of Romans 13 in light of Scott might have for liberation theology.

James C. Scott. Social scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott unwittingly ignited a revolution in biblical studies with the publication of his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* in 1990.⁴ Scott's study of peasant and agrarian societies led him to discover certain recurring dynamics of discourse in contexts where asymmetrical power relations obtain—that is to say, in political economies in which a dispossessed class is dominated by an elite, ruling class. Although Scott's primary work was done in Malaysian peasant societies, he has nevertheless observed “structurally similar forms of domination,” in “cases of slavery, serfdom, and caste subordination,” forms of domination which “bear a family resemblance to one another . . . across cultures and historical epochs.”⁵

The main lines of Scott's observations are as follows: in political economies marked by inequitable power relations, such as in systems of chattel slavery or under colonization, the norm is for the political discourse of the dominated to “dissemble,” that is, “to feign obedience and loyalty to the colonial overlords while pursuing its own hidden agenda.”⁶ On the surface of such an economy there is what Scott has called

⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990). This was the culmination of a series of studies—James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University, 1976); idem, “Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition, Part I,” *Theory and Society* 4, no. 1 (1977): 1-38; idem, “Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition, Part II,” *Theory and Society* 4, no. 2 (1977): 211-46; idem, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University, 1985); idem, “Prestige as the Public Discourse of Domination,” *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989): 156-66—all of which served as the impetus for a collection of essays presented at the Society of Biblical Literature which sought to understand Jesus, Paul, and Q in light of Scott's anthropological work. These essays were subsequently published in two volumes: Richard Horsley, ed., *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004); idem, *Oral Performance, Popular Tradition, and Hidden Transcript in Q* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006).

⁵ Scott, *Domination*, x. For the remainder of this section of the essay, references to this work will appear in the body in parenthetical notes.

⁶ William R. Herzog, “Dissembling, A Weapon of the Weak: The Case of Christ and Caesar in Mark 12:13-17 and Romans 13:1-7,” *Journal of the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion* 21 (1994): 341.

the “public transcript,” which represents the “official” interpretation of political events and power relations, engineered and controlled by the ruling elites. Invariably, eddying beneath the surface of such an economy, there is also the “hidden transcript,” a clandestine discourse produced by the subjects of domination. The public transcript is “a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” (2), whereas the hidden transcript is the “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders” (4). Put differently, the public, “onstage,” transcript represents “the *self*-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen” (18), while the hidden, “offstage” transcript, is the discourse of the oppressed, and reflects their true attitude toward their rulers.

Not surprisingly, the hidden transcript is often “derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” (4-5). This is significant, because the derivative character of the hidden transcript allows the oppressed, in the midst of onstage performances of the public transcript, to insert allusions, generally imperceptible to the ruling elites, to the hidden transcript, thus counterfeiting conformity to the architecture of the powerholders while simultaneously engendering solidarity among the dispossessed collaborators. Despite designs for resistance that parade just behind the facade of servile genuflection, the public discourse of the subordinated nevertheless continues to conform to the public transcript and defer to the “flattering self-image of elites” (18) because it is “simply a matter of survival for the powerless to appear compliant and obedient.”⁷ Scott calls this third form of discourse—which is a commixture of the public and the private transcripts in a single onstage performance—a “politics of disguise and anonymity.” Though it takes place onstage, where the actors are the most vulnerable, it is “designed to have a double meaning” that serves “to shield the identity of the actors,” for their protection. But “a partly sanitized, ambiguous and coded version of the hidden transcript is always present in the public discourse of the subordinate groups” (18-19).

⁷ Herzog, “Dissembling,” 341.

Needless to say, many biblical scholars have found Scott's observations considerably useful for identifying the effects of Roman-Palestinian power relations on the public discourse of first century Jews, specifically the discourses of Jesus and Paul.⁸ Although we are still in the beginning stages of testing the fruitfulness of Scott's categories (categories which Scott insists are not original to himself), several biblical historians and exegetes have already attempted to read *our* text, Rom 13:1-7, as an instance of the kind of intersection at which the offstage and onstage transcripts meet to form a "politics of disguise and anonymity." In this next section of the essay, we will evaluate two different readings of Rom 13:1-7 that have sought to understand Paul's oral performance in light of the work of James C. Scott.

T. L. Carter⁹ begins by establishing the discontinuity between Paul's laudatory description of the Roman power structure and the reality of the systemic injustice that characterized Roman order (210-11). Moreover, Carter contends that because the Christians in Rome would have been "largely made up of poor non-Latin citizens, who occupied no legal position and were of uncertain official status," they would have been among "the most vulnerable members of Roman society," their poverty rendering them "easy targets for oppression" and repression within the Roman system of jurisprudence itself.¹⁰ Furthermore, the basic nature of Roman "justice" was such that "peace was imposed upon the local population by means of intimidation and violence," a fact which was not the exception but the norm (221).¹¹ As such, any surface reading of the text "leaves the apostle making crass remarks that could not have failed to alienate his audience, who had suffered at the hands of the very authorities he was purporting to commend" (215).

Yet, Carter argues, because "the original audience of the letter shared with Paul a common experience of oppression at the hands of the authorities and were aware of the abuses that took place in the

⁸ For a good summary of Scott's theory and its pertinence to Jesus and Paul studies, see Horsley, ed., *Hidden Transcripts*, 1-26.

⁹ T. L. Carter, "The Irony of Romans 13," *Novum Testamentum* 46, no. 3 (2004): 209-228. For the remainder of this section of the essay, references to this work will appear in the body in parenthetical notes.

¹⁰ Following J. S. Jeffers, *Conflict at Rome: Social Order and Hierarchy in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 3-35, and others.

¹¹ On this point see also Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

opening years of Nero's reign, the consequent implausibility of Paul's language would have alerted his readers to the presence of irony" (209). The key factor in their ability to pick up on Paul's use of irony is that the Roman Christians' suffering under Roman domination was an experience they shared in common with him (215). In Scott's categories, this means that because of their common social location with Paul, the Roman Christians would have been aware that Paul was performing in the mode of the public transcript, and that elements of this performance would contain the hidden transcript Paul actually intended to communicate.

In order to establish the plausibility of an ironic reading, Carter shows (1) that in the Greco-Roman world ironic inversion was a well-established, widely used rhetorical device for "censuring with counterfeit praise" (209, 212-14); (2) that Paul himself made frequent use of irony to shame his opponents (214);¹² and (3) that the picture Paul paints of Roman power would have been incongruous with his most basic convictions as a Pharisaic Jew (212)¹³ as well as with his own experiences of Roman "justice" (211-12).

Before proceeding to break down an ironic reading of 13:1-7, Carter stops to situate the pericope within its surrounding context. Although many have seen 13:1-7 as an abrupt change of subject, interrupting the flow from 12:14-21 to 13:8-10, Carter suggests that an ironic reading ties the paraenesis together seamlessly. First, Carter notes that the paraenesis "is bracketed by the exhortations to adopt a distinctive lifestyle in relation to the present age." Carter points out that 12:1-2 and 13:11-14 function rhetorically as an *inclusio*, "suggesting that the intervening passage should be read as an exhortation on how Christians should conduct themselves in an evil age which is passing away." Those who have seen 13:1-7 as a "foreign body" within the paraenesis have often commented on the conspicuous absence of any eschatological rationality therein. But Carter shows that an ironic reading situates 13:1-7 firmly within the

¹² Cf. 1 Cor 1-4; 2 Cor 10-13; Gal 1:6-9, among others.

¹³ Following N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 189-95.

eschatological *inclusio* of 12:1-2 and 13:11-14, thus subverting the superficial endorsement of the imperial bureaucracy. “Paul only *seems* to grant the authorities an unconditional status: in reality they belong to the present age of darkness which is passing away” (218).

With reference to the immediate context (12:17-21), the step from consideration of the enemy to the Roman authorities is perfectly natural, since many members of the Roman congregation, not least the Jews who had just returned from the expulsion under Claudius, had suffered violence, deprivation, and extortion at the hands of the authorities. Thus, “an ironic reading of Rom 13:1-7, which portrays the authorities as enemies rather than as friends, provides a secure link with the preceding paragraph” (218).

From here, Carter breaks down an ironic reading of the text itself. He begins by identifying the subversion implicit in the claim that the Roman authorities have been appointed by God, since the authorities in turn “cannot but be subject to the God who has appointed them” (219). Blumenfeld ably underscores the irony: “Paul’s deftness of manipulating the system by working it against its self-negating proclivities is so successful as to camouflage his own wit when castigating its representatives. Throughout Rom 13:1-7 the irony is veiled (to incomprehension) as a political stereotype. ‘Fear the governing officials’ may sound as an irreproachable advice to the authorities’ ear but, these are, unbeknown to themselves, slaves to God as well (13:1).”¹⁴

Carter points out that one of the texts often cited as partially underwriting Paul’s belief in the divine institution of the authorities actually subverts the conventional understanding of that claim: “For your dominion was given you from the Lord, and your sovereignty from the Most High; he will search out your works and enquire into your plans. Because as servants of his kingdom you did not rule rightly, or keep the law, or walk according to the purpose of God, he will come upon you terribly and swiftly, because severe judgment falls on those in high places” (Wis. 6:3-5). Carter also reminds us of Jesus’ critical attitude

¹⁴ Bruno Blumenfeld, *The Political Paul: Justice, Democracy and Kingship in a Hellenistic Framework* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 391-92, n.273.

toward Roman rule, reflected in Mark 10:42: “You know that those who regard themselves as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials are tyrants over them, but not so you.” Carter suggests that “if Jesus’ words and Wis. 6:3-4 are any reflection of popular Jewish opinion of Gentile rulers, they render more unlikely the possibility that Paul’s words would be accepted without question, at least by any Jewish Christian readers in Rome” (220).

Carter argues that the reference to the sword in 13:4 is also a likely candidate for an ironic reading. “If there were a general perception that those in authority wielded the sword indiscriminately against both innocent and guilty people, it is correspondingly likely that Paul’s audience would have detected irony in his portrait of those in power as the guardians of law and order” (222). Carter cites one famous historical anecdote in which one particular Roman’s use of the sword had little to do with maintaining Rome’s famed peace:

The consulship of Quintus Volusius and Publius Scipio was marked by peace abroad and by disgraceful excesses at home, where Nero—his identity dissembled under the dress of a slave ranged the streets, the brothels, and the wine shops of the capital, with an escort whose duties were to snatch wares exhibited for sale and to assault all persons they met, the victims having so little inkling of the truth that he himself took his buffets with the rest and bore their imprints on his face. Then, it became notorious that the depredator was Caesar; outrages on men and women of rank increased; others, availing themselves of the license once accorded, began with impunity, under the name of Nero, to perpetrate the same excesses with their own gangs; and night passed as it might in a captured town. Julius Montanus, a member of the senatorial order, though he had not yet held office, met the emperor causally in the dark, and, because he repelled his offered violence with spirit, then recognized his antagonist and asked for pardon, was forced to suicide, the apology being construed as a reproach. Nero, however, less venturesome for the future, surrounded himself with soldiers and crowds of gladiators, who were to stand aloof from incipient affrays of modest dimensions and semi-private character: should the injured party behave with too much energy, they threw their swords into the scale. (Tacitus, *Annals* 13.49)¹⁵

Carter suggests that if Paul’s audience detects an oblique reference to these events in 13:4, “they would scarcely miss the echo of Nero’s profligate behaviour in the works of darkness mentioned in 13:13. An ironic reading . . . peels back the surface meaning of the text to reveal a sharp criticism of Nero’s excesses” (222). Of course, this passage from Tacitus is merely anecdotal. The Roman police were also infamous for their pervasive abuses of power. But by depicting the authorities “as those who worked for the benefit of upright citizens and who wielded the sword in order to punish evildoers,” Carter contends,

¹⁵ These events are estimated to have taken place around 55 C.E.

“Paul highlights the ways in which the authorities in Rome were actually falling short of the ideal of good government that he portrayed” (222). Paul was indeed speaking the truth when he reminded the Roman Christians that the authorities did not bear the sword in vain—as if they needed reminding—but contrary to Paul’s statement in 13:4, “the innocent had as much to fear from the sword as the wrongdoer” (221).

Carter also sees strong indications of irony in Paul’s discussion of the tax collectors in 13:6. Carter acknowledges that the term *λειτουργοι* (ministers) had a common secular function, signifying a public servant in general. But the term Paul uses is *λειτουργοι θεου* (priests of God), which has inescapable cultic overtones. In 15:16, Paul would apply this term to himself (*λειτουργον χριστου*), but here he applies it to the Roman tax collectors, “notorious for lining their pockets at others’ expense” (225). According to Quintilian, an effective use of irony is when the ironist attributes to his or her opponents virtues not possessed by them but by the ironist him or herself (*Institutio Oratoria* 9.2.48-50).

Carter further notes that it is precisely because *λειτουργοι θεου* is such an unfitting term for these tax collectors that modern translations tend to opt for “God’s servants” rather than “God’s priests,” but Paul’s audience, accustomed to the Septuagint’s cultic use of the term, would have been startled by the formulation in this context. “The lack of correspondence between the language Paul employs and the reality to which it refers is intended to signal the presence of irony. . . . The use of religious language to denote the activity of the tax collectors stretches the meaning of the language to breaking point and highlights the way in which the tax collectors fail to live up to the designation applied to them” (225).

Carter concludes that, although the Roman authorities may have been instituted by God, Paul’s ironic use of language serves to illustrate the ways that these authorities were failing to live up to their divinely allotted responsibilities. Thus, the rationale Paul puts forward for the submission to these failed authorities is intentionally spurious. As Scott has observed, “subordinate groups have typically learned . . . to clothe their resistance and defiance in ritualisms of subordination that serve both to disguise their

purposes and to provide them with a ready route of retreat that may soften the consequences of a possible failure.”¹⁶ Carter thus sees Rom 13:1-7 as a rather sharp instance of what Scott terms “the infrapolitics of subordinate groups.”¹⁷

Neil Elliott¹⁸ has also tried to heed Scott’s call to take texts seriously by paying close attention to the dynamics of discourse that are persistent throughout all asymmetrical power relationships. Scott points out that any hermeneutical analysis “based exclusively on the public transcript is likely to conclude that subordinate groups endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination.”¹⁹ Elliott sees this, our failure to delve beneath the public transcript, as one of the factors contributing to the cooptation of Romans 13 by the very powers Paul sought to expose therein. “Only the most pernicious twists of fate would later enlist these verses in service of the empire itself.”²⁰ But the blame does not lie solely on the empires of this world. “That we should allow these verses to thwart even the most modest inquiries into our government’s complicity in repression and murder is a staggering betrayal. . . . Only the arrogant presumptions of our own privilege have allowed us to hear these verses as a sacred legitimation of power.”²¹

So how ought we to hear these verses? The fact that these words of the apostle Paul were as early as the second century worn incisively on the lips of Christian martyrs should be our first indication that not everything is at it seems on the surface. “The declaration of loyalty,” the public transcript, “belongs together with persecution, in a tradition reaching back to the Jewish martyrs under the Greek tyrant

¹⁶ Scott, *Domination*, 96.

¹⁷ Scott, *Domination*, 183-201.

¹⁸ Neil Elliott, “Strategies of Resistance and Hidden Transcripts in the Pauline Communities,” in *Hidden Transcripts*, 97-122. For the remainder of this section of the essay, references to this work will appear in the body in parenthetical notes.

¹⁹ Scott, *Domination*, 2.

²⁰ Neil Elliott, “Romans 13:1-7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Harrisburg: Trinity, 1997), 204.

²¹ Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God & the Politics of the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 226.

Antiochus Epiphanes.”²² Thus, Elliott proceeds (113ff) by locating us more broadly within the milieu of Judaism under Roman domination. Elliott examines the writings of Philo, demonstrating Philo’s frequent oscillation between the public transcript of Roman benefaction and the hidden transcript of Roman brutality. In the second book of *On Dreams*, for instance, Philo discusses Joseph’s dream in which sheaves of grain bow down to him. Ostensibly interpreting the biblical text, Philo proceeds to depict the proud men who “set themselves up above everything, above cities and laws and ancestral customs and the affairs of the several citizens,” who impose “dictatorship over the people,” bringing “into subjection even souls whose spirit is naturally free and unenslaved” (*De Somniis* 2.79-79). Here Philo’s chosen genre, biblical allegory, “allows him a certain ‘deniability,’ a ‘disguise’ for his political views” (114).²³ His political views, of course, are seen in his description of an “unnatural imposition of dictatorship upon those who are naturally free” (114). This reading, of course, has no basis in the Genesis text.

Nevertheless, fully conscious of the destructive power of the Roman empire, Philo encourages caution (the public transcript), over against what he calls “ultimate frankness” (the hidden transcript). Philo acknowledges the existence of “lunatics and madmen” who “dare to oppose kings and tyrants in words and deeds.” But, as Elliott points out, Philo does not call them “lunatics” because “they fail to recognize the inherent benefit of accepting their subordination to the imperial order (as the official transcript would define lunacy)” (115). On the contrary, they are lunatics, according to Philo, because they refuse to see how destructive the imperial order can be to those who challenge the public transcript. They are blind to the fact that

not only like cattle are their necks under the yoke, but that the harness extends to their whole bodies and souls, their wives and children and parents, and the wide circle of friends and kinsfolk united to them by fellowship of feeling, and that the driver can with perfect ease spur, drive on or pull back, and mete out any treatment small or great just as he pleases. And therefore they are branded and scourged and mutilated and undergo a combination of all the sufferings which merciless cruelty can inflict short of death, and finally are led away to death itself. (*De Somniis* 2.83-84)

²² Ibid., 225-26.

²³ Cf. Scott, *Domination*, 136-82.

For this reason, Philo promotes caution over “ultimate frankness.” This can be seen further in another allegorical reading, this time of Genesis 23:7, in which Philo describes Abraham’s obedience to the sons of Heth. “Although the text does not present these terms, Philo insists that Abraham’s obedience was compelled by ‘fear,’ not ‘respect,’ playing on a well-known political topos” (116):²⁴ “For it was not out of any feeling of respect for those who by nature and race and custom were the enemies of reason . . . that he brought himself to do obedience. Rather it was just because he feared their power at the time and their formidable strength and cared to give no provocation” (*De Specialibus Legibus* 2.90). Philo’s interpretation, again having no basis in the text, was autobiographical. “The speeches Philo puts into the mouths of the praiseworthy [*De Somniis* 2.93-95] are worthy of any zealot call to arms. The political subordination Philo describes is tantamount to living as brute livestock, suffering torment and indignity until finally being butchered” (115). But all of this “is said obliquely, in the most general of terms” (116), because “to give no provocation” is the mark of true prudence under domination. “Just as a traveler encountering a bear or a lion or a wild boar on the road will seek to soothe and calm the beast, so the wise citizen will manifest patience and deference to rulers” (*De Specialibus Legibus* 2.86-87).²⁵

We are able to discern in Philo two distinct transcripts: the onstage, public transcript, and the offstage, hidden transcript. Caution must be exercised until “the times are right,” when a “social space is opened up in which the ‘offstage’ transcripts can come onstage” (117), then “it is good to set ourselves against the violence of our enemies and subdue it; but when the circumstances do not present themselves, the safe course is to stay quiet” (*De Specialibus Legibus* 2.92).

Having established the existence of Scott’s categories within the Judaism of the Roman empire, Elliott proceeds to analyze Paul’s language against this template. First, Elliott sees in Rom 13:11-13 traces of a hidden transcript, appearing onstage, in Paul’s encrypted allusions to “the time,” “the hour,” and “the

²⁴ Cf. Elliott, “Romans 13:1-7,” 198-99.

²⁵ Compare with Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.396.

day.” Paul could expect “these terse phrases to be meaningful to his hearers without elaborating the apocalyptic scenario to which they refer.” (117).

Using Scott’s terminology, we might speak of a fully apocalyptic *offstage* transcript to which Paul makes repeated references. Indeed, the very intentionality of apocalyptic or “revelatory” rhetoric is to refer to a reality that is not universally, or “publicly,” evident—as Paul puts it, a reality that must be “revealed” as a “mystery” (Rom. 11:25) but is otherwise “unsearchable” and “inscrutable” (Rom. 11:33). These observations lead to the suggestion that *every performance of one of Paul’s letters, before a group constituted as an “ekklesia,” generated a social site for the rehearsal and reiteration of a hidden apocalyptic transcript.* (118, original emphasis)

According to Elliott, this very “hiddenness” of the apocalyptic transcript in Romans explains why many interpreters who “easily gravitate to more self-evident language” have been baffled by the apparent lack of apocalypticism in Romans, considering the pervasiveness of apocalyptic logic in Paul’s other letters (118).²⁶

Elliott suggests that one hermeneutical key for discerning Pauline hidden transcripts is by identifying Paul’s use of the cross of Christ to illustrate his own “apostolic presence.” Elliott points to several Pauline hidden transcripts (1 Cor 1:18-25; 2:6-8; 2 Cor 2:15-16; 1 Thess 5:2-4), but focuses on 2 Cor 2:14: “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ.” The image represents an ironic inversion of the public transcript in which the triumphal procession of the imperial “benefactors” is applied to Paul’s arrest and imprisonment in Ephesus (2 Cor 1:8-9), whereas “the public transcript regards Paul as simply a humiliated captive.” Thus, according to Elliott, the fact that “here and elsewhere Paul establishes a distinction between public and hidden transcripts in terms borrowed from the ceremonial of the imperial cult suggests that the larger transcript of Paul’s gospel is powerfully ironic and subversive of the imperial order” (119). In this light, Elliott sets out to reexamine Romans 13.

Elliott attempts to draw the hidden transcripts to the surface by situating the pericope against the backdrop of Roman imperial rhetoric. There was a distinction made by Roman propagandists, beginning with Cicero, between the use of persuasion in politics, and the threat of force. The latter was “necessary only for insubordinate and uncivilized peoples,” but the art of persuasion applied to citizens, who would “naturally yield their happy consent” (120). Thus the prudent politician would be skilled in the art of

²⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 310, exemplifies the perplexed on this point.

rhetoric, in order to persuade his peers, as well as in military strategy, in order to coerce his inferiors (*De Haruspicum Responsis* 5.6, 3.41). Persuasion and coercion were long considered the “twin instruments of social order” (*History of Rome* 2.126).

Thus it was upon this conventional distinction between persuasion and coercion that Nero’s propagandists depended when they argued that “strategies of coercion belonged to a bygone era: The emperor had come to power without resort to violence, and had thus ushered in a golden age of Clemency” (120). Nero’s Clemency had “broken every maddened sword-blade,” forging “peace in her fullness” by “knowing not the drawn sword” (Calpurnius Siculus, *Eclogue* 1.45-65). The armaments of Rome’s former wars were now “mere historical curiosities,” (120; cf. *Einsiedeln Eclogues* 25-30). Seneca, who worked for the Nero administration, put this proclamation on the lips of Nero: “With me the sword is hidden, nay, is sheathed; I am sparing to the utmost of even the meanest blood; no man fails to find favor at my hands though he lack all else but the name of man.” Seneca effervesced that such a benign ruler need not fear for his own well-being, hence “the arms he wears are for adornment only” (*De Clementia* 1.3; 13.5).

With this unflinching propaganda fomenting in the background, we can begin to see the incongruity between the official transcript and the perspective of Paul. Despite the claims of the emperor’s propagandists, Paul reminds the Roman Christians that “the Roman sword is still wielded, provoking terror (*phobos*, 13:4)” (120). Though the emperor may claim to wear his sword purely for ornamental purposes, the reality is that “he does not bear the sword in vain.” Thus, Paul urges the fledgling Christian community in Rome to adopt a “posture of ‘subjection’ or ‘subordination’ rather than revolt (13:2)” (120). Elliott points out the parallel here between Paul’s hidden transcripts and “the carefully calculated remarks” in Philo’s *On Dreams*. “While Roman propaganda leads us to expect that a beneficiary of the Roman order would extol *consent* and *agreement* . . . Paul speaks, with what would have sounded like the ingratitude of the uncivilized, of two alternatives: subjection (υποτασσεσθαι) or revolt (αντιτασσεσθαι; ανθιστεμι).” Thus we can see how, “given the exuberant currents of political

rhetoric in the Neronian age, Paul's phrases encouraging submission are remarkably ambivalent." While Paul's ambivalence could clearly not be mistaken for outright insubordination, Elliott reminds us that "in a Roman official's ear, Paul's language would have seemed to offer a peculiarly grudging compliance, rather than the grateful contentment of the properly civilized" (120-21).

In conclusion Elliott suggests that we read Rom 13:1-7 as an ad hoc strategy for survival produced in turbulent political times. Dunn concurs at least on this point, calling Paul's realism the "realism of the little people who had the most to lose" should another revolt arise.²⁷ Elliott insists that "Paul was at least as adroitly political a creature as Philo," who pleaded with his restive kinsmen to discern the political moment (121). What is remarkable here is not that Paul was a political animal after all. What is remarkable, Elliott asserts, is how "out of step" Paul's warning to the Roman Christians would have sounded "to ears accustomed to the exultant themes of Roman eschatology. In effect, Paul declares: 'The empire is as dangerous as it has ever been. Nothing has changed. Exercise caution'" (121).

Conclusion. If the readings of Carter and Elliott have been at all persuasive, and I am so persuaded, it should be clear by now that in Rom 13:1-7 Paul is saying relatively little about government qua government. Paul's concern is not to demarcate the differences between just and unjust governments, because Paul is writing to a people who obviously are and have been the subjects of systemic Roman injustice for some time. Rather than constituting a treatise on the state, Romans 12-13 taken together is meant to contrast the Roman order against the body of Christ in order to show how the two stand in opposition to one another. In doing this, Paul is also concerned to display how the body politic of the crucified one is to wrestle with that very real opposition in the very real world of domination and subordination. Hinkelammert's reading, therefore, that there is in Paul "no Christian political thought dealing with domination,"²⁸ could not be further from the reality. What we see instead is the discourse of the dominated, a discourse designed precisely to cast light on the very structures of

²⁷ Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 155-87.

²⁸ Hinkelammert, *Ideological Weapons*, 152.

Roman domination in order to expose them as hollow. Thus it seems apparent that liberation theologians may have more of an ally in Paul than traditionally recognized.

Yet the nature of the material allows for no easy appropriations of Paul into this or that theology of social change. It is precisely because we see in Romans 13 the discourse of the dominated that we must be cautious. The fact is that we simply do not and cannot know what Paul might have to say about government, and the Christian's relationship to it, under different circumstances. Given the twofold problem of Paul's belief in the imminent parousia and the mode of his speech, here, in the public transcript, it is difficult to surmise from his extant writings what strategy he might take up. If the eschaton were further off than anticipated and structures of domination had had to change radically in order to coexist with ideals such as democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech, how different might Romans 13 look? We cannot pretend to know. We can assume, following the readings of Carter and Elliott, that Paul would at least (1) seek to hold up certain notions of what is just against any authority claiming to act on behalf of justice, and (2) seek to expose and therefore undermine the authority of any powerbroker failing to measure up to those standards of justice assumed by Paul. But there is not enough evidence from the text to deduce precisely how Paul would respond to injustice in the 21st century in the United States, in Latin America, in Palestine, etc., as opposed to the first century Roman order. These are questions we shall have to answer for ourselves, with Paul perhaps as an inspiration, and God alone as a judge.

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