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# THE ARROGANCE OF NATIONS

READING ROMANS  
IN THE  
SHADOW OF EMPIRE

NEIL ELLIOTT

Fortress Press  
Minneapolis

THE ARROGANCE OF NATIONS  
Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire

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*If we rightly understand ourselves, our problems are the problems of Paul: and if we be enlightened by the brightness of his answers, those answers must be ours. . . . In the past [those] who hungered and thirsted after righteousness naturally recognized that they were bound to labor with Paul. They could not remain unmoved spectators in his presence. Perhaps we too are entering upon such a time.*

—Karl Barth

*Only a genuine philosophy of history is capable of respecting the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day. . . . Only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential mystery of the cultural past, which, like Tiresias drinking the blood, is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak, and to deliver its long-forgotten message in surroundings utterly alien to it. This mystery can be reenacted only if the human adventure is one. . . .*

—Fredric Jameson

*Our nation's move toward empire is an issue for us not only as citizens of the United States but also as Christian theologians. Christian faith must articulate itself in the context of the dominance of a civil religion that is also a political theology. This political theology is remarkably similar to the political theology of Rome in the first century of the Christian era. . . . The situation for Americans today is remarkably like that of Paul. . . . Even in the churches, it is risky to state clearly that loyalty to Christ requires Christians to stand against the goal of worldly empire.*

—John B. Cobb Jr. and David J. Lull

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## CHAPTER FIVE

# VIRTVS

### *Virtue and the Fortunes of Peoples*

It is a tendency of imperial ideology to portray the present disposition of power and privilege as the culmination of the human story, to collapse the great unrequited struggle of history into a simple contrast of before and now. But in order to represent the status quo as just and equitable, imperial ideology must account for disparities of power in terms of disparities of worth, according to an at least implicit hierarchy of peoples.

Roman imperial ideology promulgated just such a hierarchy, with the descendants of Aeneas at the top and unworthy peoples—including the Judeans—beneath them (see chapter four). The rhetoric in Romans is set against this implicit hierarchy, yet Paul cannot mount an argument “based in the structure of reality” because, from Paul’s point of view, present circumstances provide only meager and misleading data.<sup>1</sup> The exhortations in Romans 12–15 are grounded in an “apodeictic” rhetoric of demonstration that appeals beyond the present, indeed that seals off the present from contact with the genuine destiny of peoples. This ideological closure is achieved through the gestures of Judean apocalypticism.



IUDAEA CAPTA: A coin struck under the emperor Vespasian celebrates the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., depicting Judea as a disconsolate woman seated beneath a palm tree. Israel Museum (IDAM), Jerusalem. Photo © ArtResource, N.Y.

### Virtue at the End of History

Soon after he arrived in Rome in the late first century C.E., the socially ambitious provincial Plutarch sought to ingratiate himself to prospective friends with a fawning piece of panegyric, *On the Fortune of the Romans*. In this speech, Plutarch posed the rhetorical question whether Rome’s supremacy was due more to Virtue (*Aretē*) or to Fortune (*Tychē*). Plutarch suffered no illusion that virtue was its own reward. However admirable, and however well represented in the host of Rome’s past worthies, Virtue had a reputation for failure to crown its brightest adherents with success. Fortune, on the other hand, was widely regarded as unreliable, even capricious. “Virtue’s labors, they say, are fruitless, Fortune’s gifts untrustworthy.” To which should the pride of Rome’s sovereignty be ascribed?

Plutarch answered, unsurprisingly, *both*. "By joining forces," Virtue and Fortune "co-operated in completing this most beautiful of human works," the Roman Empire. Thus he claimed to vindicate Virtue as "most profitable" because she had "done such good to good men," and Fortune as "a thing most steadfast" because "she has already preserved for so long a time" Rome's marvelous, beneficent power. It could not have happened any other way; this, Plutarch declared, was divine destiny. Rather than abandoning the human race to the "swell and drift" of history, the "shifting conditions of human affairs," Chronos had chosen to bless with Fortune the one people in whom Virtue "in every form was inborn"—the Romans.<sup>2</sup>

Some years earlier, another provincial, the Judean Joseph ben Mattathias (Josephus), had expressed similar ideas as he implored his fellow Judeans to abandon their defense of besieged Jerusalem. The practical argument was obvious: "the might of the Romans was irresistible," as other nations had already discovered. "An established law" of brute force governed human affairs: "Yield to the stronger," since "the mastery [*to kratein*] is for those pre-eminent in arms." But Josephus offered another, more palatably theological argument. Fortune (*Tyche*) had passed over to the Romans. "God who went the round of the nations, bringing to each in turn the rod of empire, now rested over Italy." The Romans had already shown their moral superiority by holding themselves back from destroying the Temple, while the rebels risked its destruction by defying Rome from its walls. The Romans, he pleaded, were "naturally lenient in victory," and indeed were the Judeans' "own true allies." Yet the Romans had been drawn to Judea to oppose "the impiety of the land's inhabitants," that is, the partisan strife of the Hasmonean dynasty, and so God had "subjected to the Romans those who were unworthy of liberty." How much worse, Josephus cried, were the rebels.<sup>3</sup>

Neither Plutarch nor Josephus can be described as intellectually adventurous in these passages. Both expressed the banal realism of those who imagine they stand at "the end of history," confident that the future will be only a continuation of the present and that such a future will be, for them at least, satisfactory. The final and proper disposition of the wretched of the earth was accomplished. That the world's peoples were ultimately better off under the stern but necessary discipline of empire was, for both men, a foregone conclusion. Their perspective must have seemed obvious to countless subjects of Roman imperialism, who could readily draw the appropriate lesson from the face of history. As Terry Eagleton observes, the ideological strategies of empire serve to naturalize hegemony and to make present power relations appear inevitable.<sup>4</sup>

Virgil, a much subtler mind than either Plutarch or Josephus, could allow the voice of dissent to ring in his epic; but the *Aeneid* is the exception that proves the rule. As Aeneas and his Trojan horde march against the capital of the kingdom they have invaded, royal Juno addressed the council of Olympian gods to protest their aggression. "Did any man or god constrain Aeneas to seek war and advance as a foe" upon the kingdom of the Latins, or to "stir up peaceful peoples?" She admitted the Trojans had been wronged, their city destroyed. But

what about the fact that the Trojans are attacking the Latins with smoking torches, that they are overrunning the fields of other men and are driving off the booty? What about laying claim to a father-in-law and leading an espoused maiden away from the arms of her lover, begging peace with their hands while mounting weapons on their ships?<sup>5</sup>

Good questions, these, which aroused murmurs of agreement from the assembled gods, and might have caused a momentary cloud of doubt to pass over the mind of a good Roman reader. But Jupiter answered them with a thundering equanimity. He would not take sides:

Whatever fortune everyone enjoys today, whatever hope each one . . . entertains, I will regard with no distinction, whether it is by the destiny of the Italians that the camp is besieged, or by some unfortunate error of Troy or some unsound advice. . . . Each one's beginnings will bring labor and fortune. Jupiter is the same king for all men. Fate will find a way.<sup>6</sup>

The protest of innocence is disingenuous, given Jupiter's decisive intervention throughout the preceding narrative. But it bore home an ideological truth as important for Virgil as for Plutarch and Josephus. The eventual triumph of the Roman people was the inevitable result alike of fate and of their own virtue. They had won the "labor and fortune" of world domination. We see at work in the *Aeneid* the force of ideology as what Fredric Jameson has called a "strategy of containment," accommodating and neutralizing the possibility of dissent from Roman domination.<sup>7</sup> The peoples, the narrative implies, had had their chance, in a history governed by an impartial heaven. One people had emerged victorious, and to them the future rightly belonged. The thought that the others might still play a role in shaping their own history was repressed: for Nero, into the stuff of nightmares, as Suetonius relates.<sup>8</sup>

In our own day, an official of the U.S. State Department has announced our arrival at "the end of history" after the fall of the Berlin Wall and with it, the perceived collapse of any alternative to the liberal democratic order and the selective economic freedoms of global capitalism.<sup>9</sup> There appear no imaginable futures other than the inevitable unfolding of the "free market," as we have learned to call the global economic order that is imposed by a deft combination of military, diplomatic, and economic force. That *ideologically asserted* free market daily assimilates more and more of the world's *actually existing* free markets into the stern and arbitrary discipline of "structural adjustment."<sup>10</sup>

In the powerful West, the initial exuberance of standing at the "end of history" has faded somewhat after the terrible blow of September 11, 2001, which is widely viewed as a turning point in history. That it was, Noam Chomsky observes, insofar as the target on that terrible day was not "one of the . . . traditional victims of international terrorism"; to the contrary, the attacks showed that rich and powerful nations "no longer are assured the near monopoly of violence that has largely

prevailed throughout history."<sup>11</sup> But the rhetoric that has saturated our airwaves since that day—of an endless war between good and evil, between the virtue of a free people and the dark forces arrayed against it—presumes the same ideological premise as the "end of history": There is no feasible alternative to "the freedom" that the United States represents and imposes.<sup>12</sup>

For the majority of the world's people, that date brought no fundamental change in circumstances, except that they now seem even more inexorable. "There exists only one lord and master, and only one system," theologian of liberation Franz Hinkelammert declared already in 1995. That system is the "wild" or "savage capitalism" that wreaks havoc throughout Latin America and beyond. "The empire," meaning the neocolonial empire of global capitalism, "is everywhere. It has total power and it knows it. . . . The consciousness that an alternative exists is lost. It seems there are no longer alternatives."<sup>13</sup> From the imperial center, the global struggle is perceived as a combat between good and evil, virtue and tyranny; but from other points of view, the line of demarcation seems clearly to follow the gradient of power. Outside of those centers, the drama remains one of exploitation and misery, and virtue does not appear to be the monopoly of the powerful.

### *An apocalyptic logic of dissent*

We have seen in earlier chapters that the truths proclaimed by Roman imperial ideology were not universally recognized. Not all Judeans shared Josephus's perception of Roman virtue. Perhaps a century earlier, the author of the Habakkuk Pesher had detected in the first encounters with Roman intervention nothing but arrogance, brutality, and limitless greed. Nor did he feel any need to justify Roman domination theologically. It was enough to know that God would at last condemn the conquerors, and to describe the unexpected prolongation of that final accounting as a matter of divine "mysteries" (*razim*).<sup>14</sup>

It is tempting to regard Josephus, by comparison, as a rank and cynical opportunist, an apostate, even as a traitor.<sup>15</sup> But rather than inquire as to Josephus's psychology or level of patriotic feeling, we might as reasonably ask how the author of the Habakkuk Pesher managed to avoid what to many of his contemporaries must have seemed self-evident. Claiming to present, on the strength of inspired interpretation, the true meaning of ancient Scripture, the pesharist declared the true destiny of peoples. The present was only a historical aberration, of necessarily limited duration. Apocalyptic rhetoric provided a strategy of containment that allowed the pesharist and his community to perceive present circumstances not as determinative of the future, but as a temporary deviation from God's ultimate disposition of human affairs.

If history had indeed reached its end, then that end meant, for the poor, unrequited heartbreak. Philo described feeling that heartbreak when his delegation stood before the dismissive and contemptuous emperor Gaius, aware that his policies toward the Judeans of Alexandria and Judea itself would bring swift and utter ruin to his people.

contemplated the status of the Judean community of Rome, broken and defamed as the miserable and unworthy recipients of Nero's pity. In Roman eyes—and (I have argued in earlier chapters) in the eyes of some of the non-Judean members of the *ekklesia* to whom he addressed this letter—the Judeans were to be numbered among the vanquished. If history had reached its end, as imperial ideology proclaimed, then the "mysteries" of which the author of the Habakkuk Pesher spoke were nothing else but the inscrutable *mysterium iniquitatis*.<sup>16</sup>

But both Judeans—Paul and the author of the Habakkuk Pesher—relied upon apocalyptic *topoi* to insist that history had *not* reached its end. Mystery was the apocalyptic category to which Paul, too, resorted at the climax of his letter:<sup>17</sup> "So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery" (11:25). This *mysterion* concerns the *true* meaning of present circumstances, a meaning not available to observation but only as it is Paul's to reveal: "a hardening has come upon a part of Israel."

As we saw in chapter three, a dissociative logic shapes Paul's discussion of Israel's "stumbling" throughout Romans 9–11. His purpose there was to distinguish between *present appearances*, and the false conclusions to which they might lead, and *reality*, which will be fully manifest only in the future, but is already clear enough to those who (like Paul) understand Scripture and thus can discern history's paradoxical true meaning. As we also saw in chapter three, the failure to recognize the dissociative nature of Paul's argument in Romans 9–11 has often led to an erroneous, and historically disastrous, typological reading, according to which Paul here explains the logic of election (or exclusion) by which God has indeed allowed the majority of Israel to "stumble so as to fall." Israel's history, on this reading, has already run its course.

I referred in the Introduction to the "apodeictic" character of Paul's rhetoric, meaning his appeal to what Aristotle called inartificial proofs (such as laws, testimonies, and oracles: for Paul, Scripture). Paul appeals to the Spirit's witness to the truth he seeks to reveal—

I am speaking the truth in Christ. I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit. . . . (9:1)

—and invokes scriptural "promises" as more real than mere historical circumstance:

It is not the children of flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants. . . . (9:8)

He calls his hearers to abandon what seems obvious and to understand instead that God is revealing a paradoxical and counterintuitive reality:

But if God, desiring to demonstrate [*endeixasthai*] his wrath and to make known [*gnōrisai*] his power, has endured with great patience the vessels of wrath that are made for destruction; and has done so in order to make known



Opposing visions of the destinies of peoples. Left: The goddess Venus appearing to Aeneas. Illustrated manuscript of Virgil's *Aeneid* (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican Museums, Vatican State; photo © Snark/Art Resource, N.Y.). Right: The prophet Ezekiel receives revelation from God; fresco, ca. 239 C.E., from the synagogue in Dura Europos, Syria (photo © Art Resource, N.Y.).

The manifest character of this reality—its being shown, that is, “made known”—clearly remains in the future. For now, appearances can be deceiving. Those who have been “endured with much patience”—that is, *the disobedient among the nations*—might appear, through the lens of imperial ideology, to be heaven’s favorites. Those who have not yet been revealed as the “objects of mercy”—that is, those who are called, including Judeans and obedient men and women from the nations (9:24)—might appear at present to be history’s God-forsaken victims.

But Paul reveals, through a mystery, the actual state of affairs. God had imposed a temporary hardening upon Israel in order to bring about a breathtaking alternative future that would include the nations and a restored Israel together. Paul cannot refer his hearers to what appears self-evident, but must appeal instead to the clear testimonies of Scripture and the Spirit, which witness that “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (11:29). He calls his audience to resist the mind-set of the present age and contemplate the “the mercies of God” (12:1-2), which as he has just demonstrated (11:25-36) are not what they might seem. He bids them offer themselves to God in a “reasonable worship” (*logikē latreia*), being enabled by the renewing of their minds to perceive God’s will (12:1-2).

Other Judeans in Paul’s day made similar appeals, in similar terms, urging their hearers (or readers) not to confuse present circumstances with God’s providential will. The martyrs under Antiochus were able to defy the tyrant, the author of *4 Maccabees* explained, because the law had already instructed their minds. Reason—*logos*—ruled over their senses. Their knowledge—despite the evidence around them—that their defiance would be rewarded, and the tyrant’s oppres-



irrational, by the standards of the Greek king. This was a contested *logos*: The martyrs could demonstrate that this *logos* reigned in their minds only by their submission to torture and death. The tyrant and his officers “marveled” as the Judeans refused perfectly reasonable and sympathetic appeals for them to consider their own persons, their family, and their community. Despite the author’s use of the vocabulary of Greek philosophy, the “logic” of the defiance ascribed to the martyrs is premised on an apocalyptic vision of a coming reversal of fortunes. Their deaths will be avenged, and they will live in eternal blessedness.

Only at the end of a “most philosophical” discussion does the author betray the ferocity that occasioned his writing, very probably in the wake of the pogrom in Alexandria in 38–41 C.E. (see chapter three). “For these crimes”—ostensibly, the deaths by torture of Judeans on a “bitter day” during the reign of Antiochus IV, *in the second century B.C.E.*—the author declares that “divine justice pursued, and will pursue the accursed tyrant.”<sup>18</sup> The tyrant to be pursued in the future tense can only be a Roman.

Philo similarly challenged his readers not to perceive with the bodily senses, which “discern [only] what is manifest and close at hand.” Doing so, they might draw from the enormity of recent events the wrong conclusions, and end up miserably “ruled by the present.” Rather he calls on them to perceive with reason, *to logosmos*, which will reveal to them that “the Deity takes thought for human affairs,” and especially for Israel.<sup>19</sup>

For Paul, as for these Hellenistic Judeans who are his closest literary contemporaries known to us, the “reasoned” discernment to which he calls his hearers is informed by an apocalyptic logic. The exhortation in Romans 12–15 depends upon the argumentation in earlier chapters, especially the climactic chapters 9–11. But despite the keen interest of Christian interpreters in elaborating the relationship of “indicative and imperative” at this argumentative hinge,<sup>20</sup> the rhetorical connection here is not a theological abstraction. It has a situational *and ideological* specificity, as do the comparable dissociative gestures made by Philo and the author of *4 Maccabees*. The mercies of God (*tōn oiktirmōn tou theou*, 12:1) are specifically the strategic mercies whereby (according to Paul) God has maneuvered Israel out of position in order to bring about the inclusion of the nations (9:32–33; 11:22–23).<sup>21</sup>

The exhortation in Romans 12–15 is grounded in the dissociative argumentation that has preceded it. In Romans, as for Paul’s Judean contemporaries, the appeal to apocalyptic categories of revelation and mystery served as an ideological strategy of containment that effectively represses “the unthinkable.”<sup>22</sup> The notion that God had actually abandoned Israel was beyond contemplation for Paul (*mē genoito!* 11:1). But closing off that prospect—which seemed evident enough to some among Paul’s hearers—required closing off the apparent course of history itself, so to speak, so that present circumstances could *not* be read as indicators of the course of the future. “God has imprisoned all in disobedience,” Paul declared (11:32). The present is not the inevitable result of some process in which heaven

the course of history so as to suspend it; and God as abruptly will bring about the long-promised fulfillment of God's own purposes ("showing mercy to all," 11:32) in a break with the present as sharp as the raising of Jesus from the dead. It is not an accident that Paul praises God's inscrutable mystery in a quotation from Second Isaiah. There is a dramatic analogy between the assertion, on the part of the apostle and the prophet, of a future wholly discontinuous with the present.<sup>23</sup>

### *An ethic of solidarity*

If we failed to recognize the dissociative argumentation that informs Paul's exhortation, we might regard the appeals in Romans 12 as private, appropriate to "the 'inner room' of the transformed, . . . the cult room and its atmosphere of 'brotherly love'";<sup>24</sup> so writer Halvor Moxnes. Moxnes recognizes that Paul shares with others a critique of the competitive honor-and-shame system of Roman culture, opposing *sôphrosynê* to *hyperphronein* and urging his hearers not to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think (12:3). But Moxnes limits that exhortation to the sphere of the congregation; it is an ethic "primarily addressed to internal relations within groups of Christians."<sup>25</sup> Necessarily so, for Moxnes reads the subsequent exhortation to be subject to the governing authorities (13:1-7) as straightforward evidence of "Paul's acceptance of the system of honor" that played out on the public square in Roman society, "with the emperor at the top, followed by his representatives and city officials." On Moxnes's reading, Paul accepted in the public sphere the same system that he repudiated in the private sphere of the church because his church was "in a dependent situation"; his critique of the honor culture "therefore had certain given limits," and "could only be expressed within the area of self-determination."<sup>26</sup> But the apocalyptic logic that shapes Romans 1-11 precludes so static a reading of the exhortation in 12-15. The coolly balanced acceptance of "private" and "public" spheres is exactly what the apocalyptic strategy of containment renders unthinkable.

Similarly, if we discounted or ignored the apocalyptic texture of Paul's argumentation, we might compare Paul's statements about the governing authorities (13:1-7) in a flatly literal way with the tradition of popular Hellenistic philosophy on kingship. Thus Bruno Blumenfeld has compared "the political Paul" with a supposed "standard" political doctrine in the Hellenistic and Roman eras, which he draws from a tradition of Hellenistic treatises among the philosophical schools, all heavily dependent upon Plato and Aristotle (and all easily aligned with what we should call—though Blumenfeld does not—the "public transcript" in the Hellenistic and Roman periods).<sup>27</sup> Blumenfeld himself acknowledges the rigidly hidebound character of this tradition,<sup>28</sup> but does not explain why anyone should look to so moribund and intellectually isolated a tradition, "a small heap of miserable scraps—a defunct collection of boring or trivial cogitation of only archival interest,"<sup>29</sup> to illuminate actual political and ideological realities in Paul's world, let alone the thought of the apostle himself.<sup>30</sup> Observing that within the "increasingly artificial and incongruous" tradition of Hellenistic treatises on kingship—

the narrow vein of material to which he has restricted himself—"the intellectual critique of the empire" was "feeble," and that there "really [was] the feeling that there [was] no substitute for Rome," Blumenfeld makes the same generalization for the wider political landscape in Paul's day. But as we have seen, that statement is easily falsified by observing oblique expressions of defiance among Paul's Judean contemporaries. By comparing isolated phrases in Paul's letters with phrases in a tightly circumscribed body of materials, Blumenfeld concludes that "Paul loves Rome" and belongs to a tradition of "apologetics for Roman power." In a flagrant anachronism, he characterizes Paul as "the ideological guardian of the processes and structures of imperial power" on the basis of the way Rom 13:1-7 was later appropriated by the Christian Byzantine empire.<sup>31</sup> But Blumenfeld provides only a particular egregious example of the common modern temptation: to project onto Paul the perfect hindsight we enjoy at a safe distance from the crisis of his time,<sup>32</sup> and thereby to derive from Paul a "Christian theology of the state."

If we failed to acknowledge the apocalyptic coordinates of Paul's exhortation in 14:1-15:13, we might read this part of the letter as Paul's answer to a flatly halakic question about the status of foods. His verdict "in the Lord Jesus" that "nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean to anyone who thinks it unclean" (14:14, 20) certainly sufficed for the Gentile Christianity that believed it had achieved unity through Christ's cancellation of the law (either by his word, Mark 7:19, or through his death, Eph 2:11-16). But as Mark D. Nanos rightly protests, if we read Romans in this way, we stigmatize the Torah-observant Judean as "weak in faith" by virtue of their scrupulosity—something Paul himself warns "the strong" *not* to do (in 14:1-4).<sup>33</sup> Interpreters who characterize "the weak" as "over-sensitive Jews" with "hyper-halakic anxieties," who because of their "narrow-minded cowardliness" "fail to trust God completely and without qualification," have fallen into what Nanos calls "Luther's trap": they perpetuate, and attribute to Paul, the very attitude Paul seeks to oppose.<sup>34</sup>

The issue between "weak" and "strong" was much more than halakic, though it clearly sprang from Judean observance of the food regulations of the Torah. There is ample evidence to suggest that at least in some quarters of the Rome to which Claudius's exiles returned, observance of *kasbrut* would have required Judeans to practice a de facto vegetarianism.<sup>35</sup> Roman satirists mocked Judean observances, including vegetarianism and the observance of days, and associated them with "weakness."<sup>36</sup> Mark Reasoner has shown that the label "weak" in Romans 14 was a contemptuous term wielded in the larger status-conscious Roman society against those who displayed excessive scrupulosity, especially if they belonged to a foreign cult. "It appears that the 'strong' applied the Roman society's evaluation of superstition on this group within their community."<sup>37</sup> Paul never contrasts "weak in faith" (*ton asthenounta tē pistei*, 14:1) with "strong in faith" (as if the disparity was a matter of the measure of faith). Rather "the strong," or "the powerful" (*hoi dynatoi*), is the self-perception of those able, by position and privilege, to distinguish themselves from the "weak" (or "sickly"), upon whom they could look down disparagingly. The "weakness" of "the weak" is due to their observance of kosher

laws, but Paul never describes that observance as a matter of inadequate response to God and forbids "the strong" from doing so.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Paul takes the side of "the weak" and prohibits the powerful from disputing over opinions (14:1), showing disdain for those who abstain from food (14:3, 10), or scandalizing the abstaining brother or sister (14:13). Paul does not congratulate the "powerful" but instead admonishes them to practice an abstinence of their own, holding back from any food that would scandalize their neighbor at a common meal.

Unity at the common meal is not the horizon of his exhortation, however. That horizon is the moment of judgment when the one who eats and the one who abstains must both stand before their Lord (14:4, 10-12). Paul looks to an eschatological horizon when the Judeans and the nations will stand together in praise of God, and this is why they must "welcome one another" now (15:7-12).

That eschatological horizon is fundamentally at odds with the Roman vision of the nations united in offering tribute to Caesar. Paul's exhortations throughout 12-15 are grounded in his concern to incorporate the Roman congregations in his own priestly service, the "offering of the nations" that he has collected from other congregations in Macedonia and Achaia and that he now prepares to take to Jerusalem (15:14-29). But that priestly service clashes inevitably with the cultic performances meant to unite all peoples in worshipful subservience to Rome.

The exhortation in Romans 12-15 goes far beyond the goal of ethnic unity in the Roman church. Paul confronts the ideological construction of a hierarchy of peoples, the discrimination of "powerful" and "weak," peoples "honorable" and "put to shame," that was daily ritualized in the Roman cult. Though the admonition to "not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment" (12:3) was of immediate relevance within the congregations, it necessarily clashed with the values of Roman public life that were at play in those same congregations. Contributing to "the needs of the saints," that is, through Paul's collection, and extending hospitality to strangers (12:13) required opening up the social circles of the household and the tenement-assembly to others, not only in the city but internationally. The exhortation, usually translated "associate with the lowly" (12:16), speaks in Greek of "making one's way with the oppressed": the noun *tapeinoi* is routinely translated as if it were a category of social status in other literature, including the Septuagint.<sup>39</sup> This is a solidarity not easily confined to the house-church. Necessarily, these exhortations led to the contemplation of opposition from others, even to suffering evil from enemies (12:17-21), and then in turn to the contemplation of confrontation with the representatives of Roman power (13:1-7).

### *The force of ideological constraint in Romans 13:1-7*

Just here, Paul draws back—fatefully, as far as the history of interpretation is concerned—from offering advice for the inevitable confrontation with Roman

authority, or even from offering criticism of their conduct of office. The exhortation in 13:1-7 is an infamous *crux interpretum*, not least because of the instrumental role to which it has been put in neutralizing Christian dissent to unjust policies.<sup>40</sup> Despite the occasional interpreter who simply accepts these lines as an uncomplicated endorsement of state authority,<sup>41</sup> it is widely recognized now that what Paul says here is an abrupt transition from what has preceded it.

As Jewett remarks, Paul's statements here clash with the "apocalyptic hostility" he shows elsewhere "against the old age and its institutions." "While Paul speaks of the 'rulers of this age' with bitter resistance in 1 Cor 2:8 and views the 'principalities and powers' as opponents in Rom 8:38, this passage seems to reflect a time when the church has made peace with the world."<sup>42</sup> We may further observe that this is the only point in the letter where Paul declares that his hearers' obedience to God will require their *submission*: "every soul" is to be subject to governing authorities (*pasa psychē exousiais hyperechousais hypotassesthō*, 13:1). This language strikes echoes of his earlier reference to the involuntary subjection (*hypetage*) of creation to "futility" and "corruption" (8:20-21), but there he speaks of the Spirit's groaning within the children of God as they await deliverance from the subjected order. The characterization of ruling authorities as "ministers of God," rewarding those who do good and bringing wrath against evildoers (13:3-4), is difficult to reconcile with the earlier assignment of just those activities to God alone (2:6-11), nor does it offer any hint of the eschatological tone that immediately follows in Paul's cryptic assurance that "the hour" and "the day" are near (13:12-13). This is the only point where Paul suggests—in a telling inconsistency—that those who are in Christ owe "fear" to their rulers (*phobon*, 13:7; contrast 13:3-4).<sup>43</sup> The language of submission and fear that appears here is a startling exception to the rhetoric of the rest of the letter; more typical is the declaration to which it immediately gives way, that obedience to God can be summed up in a single obligation, "to love one another, for the one who loves the neighbor has fulfilled the law" (13:8-11).

James Kallas sums up the disparities between these verses and the rest of Paul's corpus by declaring that "Paul could not have ascribed such an exalted status to Rome without being not only hypocritical and servile, but untrue to his whole theological position." Kallas, like a few others, concludes that the passage is an interpolation into Paul's letter.<sup>44</sup> In the absence of corroborating textual variants, most scholars have rejected that interpretive option—though Ernst Käsemann declared that even if the passage is genuine, the notion "that the authorities constantly seek to be God's servants" is "obviously exaggerated if not wholly incredible"; it did not reflect Paul's own thinking but was a stock piece of traditional material that Paul appealed to in a "forced" and unpersuasive way.<sup>45</sup> Leander E. Keck suggested posting a warning to any interpreter essaying to make sense of the passage as it stands: "Danger: Thin Ice."<sup>46</sup>

The warning has not deterred skaters. I will not try to survey all the attempts to account for Paul's disturbingly uncharacteristic language here, but three avenues

of interpretation bear particular note. One, which I continue to find compelling, appeals to recent disturbances, including Suetonius's report of "tumults" in 49 C.E. (sometimes read as "riots"), the account of a recent tax protest in nearby Puteoli that was suppressed by deadly force, and popular resentment of new taxes in Rome itself, as indications that the situation in Rome was volatile.<sup>47</sup> This situation is sometimes described as one in which Jewish agitation has created problems for the Christian congregation. Given the vulnerability of the Judean population throughout the Diaspora, however, I consider it much more likely that Paul was concerned to ward off any civil disturbances on the part of his *non-Judean hearers* that might easily have gone the way of previous disturbances in Alexandria and elsewhere, that is, by injuring a proxy target, the local Judeans.<sup>48</sup>

Another approach, represented most recently by Robert Jewett, finds in Paul's language a subtle, but nonetheless recognizable critique of Roman rule. After all, Paul does not distinguish citizens from non-citizens or persons of higher from lower rank, but calls on *all* to be subject to the authorities. The participle *tetagmenai*, mistranslated "instituted" (NRSV) or "established," has rather the stronger sense that the authorities have been "put in their place." Further, Jewett and others (notably John Howard Yoder) have argued that by calling for a *willing* subordination, Paul makes his hearers active agents rather than the passive subjects of Roman rule, something "far removed from an authoritarian ethic of obedience." Certainly the exhortation to *everyone* to be subject would have struck a jarring note if heard by Roman citizens accustomed to thinking of their own compliance not as "subjection," but as willing consent (see chapter one). But were there citizens in Paul's audience? Jewett concludes that, "if the Roman authorities had understood this argument, it would have been viewed as thoroughly subversive."<sup>49</sup> But that is an enormous *if*. The argument Jewett describes would have been too subtle to have provoked the average magistrate, who at any rate would have found the net result—the compliance of Paul's hearers—congenial enough to his purposes. The nuances that Jewett and others have identified point us to the constraints that make a whole-hearted endorsement of Roman rule impossible for Paul; but they hardly constitute a clear and unambiguous critique.

A third approach is represented by T. L. Carter's recent proposal that Paul intentionally characterizes the Roman authorities in such slavishly deferential terms that his audience must have recognized his remarks as ironic.<sup>50</sup> "When the straightforward meaning of a text is recognizably implausible or unacceptable," Carter writes, "that is one of the signals that may alert the reader or audience to the presence of irony."

If the letter's original readers shared with the author an experience of oppression at the hands of the authorities, that shared experience would have paved the way for the readers' understanding of Paul's use of irony, by rendering the surface meaning of Paul's commendation of the authorities blatantly implausible to them.<sup>51</sup>

Carter argues that despite the subsequent characterization of the early years of Nero's rule as good years, Paul and his hearers would have known better. The eschatological references to "this age" (12:2) and to the coming "hour" and "day" of reversal (13:11-14) inevitably would have subverted the "apparent" commendation of the authorities in 13:1-7: "Paul only *seems* to grant the authorities an unconditional status: in reality they belong to the present age of darkness which is passing away."<sup>52</sup>

I agree with Carter's suggestion that aspects of Paul's language militate against hearing this passage as an unambiguous endorsement of Roman rule. Indeed, in an earlier essay, I argued that specific aspects of this passage would have struck Paul's hearers as explicitly contravening aspects of imperial propaganda; but I am not convinced that these aspects—significant as they are—allow us to read the whole passage as intentionally ironic or subversive. The exhortation to *every soul* to "be subject" and to show "fear" to the authorities flew in the face of the imperial claim that some peoples experienced the "good faith" and "friendship" of Rome, and that for those peoples "fear" and the threat of force was unnecessary (see chapter one). More dramatically, Paul's comment that the authority "does not bear the sword idly" (13:4) not only strikes an echo with his earlier reference to "the sword" as one of the perils faced by the faithful in the present age (8:35-36); it also directly contradicts one of the central themes of Neronian propaganda, that in contrast to his predecessors Nero did not resort to the sword:

- Calpurnius Siculus presented a prophecy that described Nero's accession as the dawning of a golden age in which no one could remember the use of the sword. The goddess of war would turn upon herself the weapons that had previously been deployed in warfare; "fair peace" would come; "clemency . . . has broken every maddened sword-blade. . . . Peace in her fullness shall come; knowing not the drawn sword, she shall renew once more the reign of Saturn in Latium" (*Eclouge* 1.45–60).
- The first Einsiedeln *Eclouge* described a paradise inaugurated by Nero: "We reap with no sword, nor do towns in fast-closed walls prepare unutterable war." No woman anywhere gave birth to a future enemy of Rome; "unarmed, our youth can dig the fields, and the boy, trained to the slow-moving plow, marvels at the sword hanging in the abode of his fathers" (25–31).
- In the speech he presented to Nero, Seneca put into the emperor's mouth the boast that he had surpassed even his ancestor Augustus, who had come to power only through warfare: "With all things at my disposal, I have been moved neither by anger nor youthful impulse to unjust punishment. . . . 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" (*Clem.* 1.2–4).
- Seneca continued by flattering the emperor that his gift to the world was "a state unstained by blood, and your prideful boast that in the whole world you have shed not a drop of human blood is the more significant and wonderful

because no one ever had the sword put into his hands at an earlier age" (11.3). Nero would so excel among the Caesars that he would need no bodyguard for his protection; "the arms he wears are for adornment only" (13.5).

The criteria of "intertextuality" discussed in the Introduction apply here. The consistent theme expressed in three different imperial sources shows that the "idle sword" was a mainstay of Neronian propaganda. That claim would also have struck anyone living in the capital as spurious. (One even can imagine an audience hearing an unintended joke in the imperial claim; after all, Nero himself repeatedly quipped that his stepfather had been "made a god" by eating a mushroom. The sword was hardly his preferred weapon.) Paul cannot have declared that the authority "does not bear the sword idly" without his audience hearing a pointed refutation of a central theme in Nero's propaganda.<sup>53</sup>

But recognizing that Paul says things in clear tension with imperial claims does not yet mean that we must read the whole of 13:1-7 as deliberate and sustained irony. Carter finds Paul's reference to the authorities as "priests of God" (*leitourgoi theou*) so blatantly unrealistic that it must have been meant to guide his hearers to an ironic understanding of his words. Carter argues that Paul did not mean all that he said, but he does not tell us what Paul meant his audience to understand instead. He cannot; for it remains the case that to whatever extent Paul may regard Roman officials as a hostile and powerful danger, *he still enjoins subjection and compliance to the authorities*. As Carter admits, much of what Paul says in these verses can be read straightforwardly as the basis for that appeal.<sup>54</sup>

It is impossible to read a single coherent posture in Rom 13:1-7. The text is an instance neither of straightforward endorsement of Roman power nor of an ironic subversion of imperial claims. Rather, as argued in chapter one, we are in touch here with the constraining force of ideology, with "voice under domination." Given the constraining power of ideology, we must do more than ask what Paul meant; we must ask, What *larger forces* were at work to shape, and to inhibit, his response?

I have characterized Paul's rhetoric in Romans as *dissociative argumentation*, achieved by the assertion of an alternative reality through the *topoi* of apocalypticism. I do not mean that Paul has self-consciously selected certain rhetorical techniques in order to achieve desired effects. We have seen contradictions on the surface of Romans that reveal tensions beneath the surface: for example, God is the one who subjects the world to futility, yet God's Spirit groans for deliverance from that bondage (8:18-25). God calls human beings to free and willing obedience, not to slavery, yet this obedience also requires submission to God (8:7; 10:3) and, improbably, subjection to the governing authorities (13:1). And we have seen that these tensions arise, not from an idiosyncratic incoherence on Paul's part, but from fundamentally irresolvable contradictions in the material and ideological conditions in which the letter was written and which the letter was an attempt to resolve.

## Living at the End of History

Fredric Jameson proposes that we read texts, not only as expressions of the thoughts of individuals or the values of communities, but also as occasions for the emergence of the aspirations of collectives, especially social classes. That approach is not new to biblical studies. Norman Gottwald has taught us to understand the writings of the Hebrew Bible as the artifacts of a great struggle in ancient Israel between, on the one hand, a communitarian mode of production, inaugurated as a cultural revolution in the villages and cities of Canaan, and on the other hand, the "tributary" economy of the city-states that resisted or were overthrown by that revolution, of the subsequent Israelite monarchy, and at last of "colonial Judah" under Persian rule.<sup>55</sup>

In the Roman era, the ideological requirements of the tributary mode of production generated a fundamental tension between the coercive force that was necessary, but not sufficient, to hold the system together, and the ideological representation of justice, expressed in codes of reciprocity, of "faithfulness" and "friendship," that functioned to elicit the consent of the governed. We have seen that the figure of the emperor, the "sole ruler" (*autokratōr*), was a crucial central symbol within Roman imperial ideology, simultaneously representing the force necessary to maintain order and the justice necessary to win consent. Both values were sublimated in the symbolization of the Augusti at the heart of the imperial cult, which represented the emperor as the embodiment of piety and allowed the incorporation of those who participated in sacrifice into the destiny of the Roman people to rule the other peoples of the earth.<sup>56</sup>

In Romans we can see Paul appealing to the values appropriate to a communitarian mode of production. Those values include the mutual regard, deference, and generosity that will enable economic mutualism within the Roman assembly and among assemblies in other cities, but also the regard for "the weak" and for Israel that will guarantee the "sanctity" of the "offering" he takes to Jerusalem.<sup>57</sup> These resemble the values that in our day Jesuit theologian and martyr Ignacio Ellacuría has described as the "civilization of poverty," which is also the "civilization of solidarity."<sup>58</sup> But Paul, like others of his Judean contemporaries, lives within the constraining power of the Roman tributary mode of production; and like them, he confronts the dismaying reality of his people's decline and subjugation, made notoriously evident in recent events. Given the ideological tension generated by this situation, and given the constraining force of Roman ideology, Paul can imagine a resolution only in terms of an inversion of the present state of affairs. That is, he expects the advent of a superior "sole ruler," a *kyrios* who will rule the nations instead of Caesar, and who will receive the tribute of the nations—but will rule as "servant of the circumcised," that is, those who are perceived by Roman ideology as "the weak" and contemptible (15:8-9). Paul understands himself as that lord's

emissary, working to prepare the assemblies in Rome (and elsewhere) to welcome that lord at his arrival.

Non-Judean members of the Christ assemblies in Rome have begun to adopt the ideological perspective of the Roman Empire, particularly regarding the "weak"—meaning, in particular, displaced Judeans—among them. They have collapsed the imperial perception of a hierarchy of peoples into an *ecclesial* perception of Israel's "stumbling so as to fall." They have taken in the values of what Ellacuría called the "civilization of wealth" (which in our own day is the civilization of capital).<sup>59</sup> Such a civilization regards the future as a further continuation of the process of accumulation of power and prestige that is its basis. In such a civilization in our own day, Jon Sobrino writes, expectations of the future are based on "calculations" extrapolated from the present, and so "there is not a radical break between the present and the future." In Paul's day, the non-Judeans in his audience also have begun to confuse their own status "in Christ" with the status that imperial ideology promised them as participants in the civilization of wealth. They should expect to be included among "the powerful," enjoying the impunity of victors who stand at the effective end of history.

Romans is Paul's attempt to counteract the effects of imperial ideology within the Roman congregations. He seeks to reorient their perceptions around a more authentically Judean scriptural perspective, which in this case means (as Gottwald has shown) a more communitarian perspective appropriate to the practice of a "civilization of solidarity."

Because his own perspective is in the precise ideological sense "kyriarchal," it is inconceivable to Paul that human affairs are beyond the control of the *kyrios*; yet at present they clearly contradict what Scripture reveals about the "irrevocable" gifts and calling of God. It must therefore be the case, given his kyriarchal premises, that present circumstances are, paradoxically, the result of the action of God to bring the world under subjection (*hypetagei*, 8:20) and that similarly, the governing authorities have been ordered by God (*tetagmenai*, 13:1). All that Paul says about the ruling authorities flows from the constraints of his own kyriarchal perspective: it is inconceivable that it should be otherwise—that is, that the authorities should have a free hand. The same justice that has been manifested in "wrath" against the unjust (1:18-32) will inevitably be manifest on the great and coming "day" (13:11-12); it is inconceivable that it should be otherwise. To remove Rom 13:1-7 from the eschatological context of the letter is to utterly misunderstand that passage and the letter.

Because the resolution achieved in Romans is a *kyriarchal* resolution (involving a very particular *kyrios*, as we have seen), history must be seen as the arena in which God has now "imprisoned everyone in disobedience," so that God might bring about the final redemption of creation and of the children of God alike. This history has in effect been put in suspense until God should release it. History as the continuing process of accumulation and reward for the virtuous is, for Paul, *unthinkable*, and so must be suspended, brought to a halt so that another history, the history of the revelation of God's mercy "to all" (11:30-32), may

commence. In these terms, Sobrino's decisive formulation is glimpsed already in Paul: *ex pauperes nulla salus*, "no salvation outside [or: apart from] the poor."

Because Paul's theology is kyriarchal, the possibility that "the weak," meaning Israel in its historical experience of subjection to foreign powers, might serve a redemptive role is obscured. Israel has been "hardened" for the sake of the nations (11:7, 11-12, 25, 28), specifically the nations as they perceive themselves as having arrived at history's culmination (9:30). But Paul does not offer or invite further reflection on the historical experience of subjected Israel; nor is there any role for the *ekklesiai* other than waiting, with patience, endurance, and eager anticipation, for the coming redemption.

Nevertheless, the letter is driven by the longing of the earth's peoples for their liberation from bondage and entry into their proper destiny as the children of God (8:18-25). At just this point, we see the compelling power for Paul of those collective aspirations that Fredric Jameson has termed the "political unconscious," temporarily repressed from the public sphere by the pressures of hegemony but ultimately irrepressible. It is the work of an energizing Spirit that brings these aspirations to expression in "sighs too deep for words." Alongside the kyriarchal representation of God as the lord subjecting the world to bondage, Paul also—simultaneously—speaks of the activity of the Spirit in the longings of the oppressed world.

Just here we confront the central irony of this letter's legacy down to the present. The apocalyptic logic of Romans was a necessary attempt to close off a particular way of construing the present that was current in imperial ideology. Paul's apocalyptic logic depended for its force on the imminent realization of an alternative kyriarchy, the coming "day" of the Messiah. Centuries later, we who live in the "civilization of wealth" are accustomed to read Paul with perfect hindsight: we know that he was *not* living on the threshold of the end of history. To the contrary, history—the history of continuing accumulation—continues. It has proven far easier for us to assimilate Romans to that history, *our* history, and to perceive Paul's alternative history as apocalyptic fantasy. Removed from the context of its apocalyptic coordinates, the Spirit's voice in the "groaning of creation" is readily ignored as we live "as if the poor did not exist," or else it is heard only as the cry of the wretched asking for our magnanimity.<sup>60</sup> The kyriarchy of Paul's rhetoric is all too easily aligned with the very ideology of empire that Paul sought to oppose.

### *The ghosts in Romans*

"Only the Messiah himself consummates all history," wrote Marxist literary critic Walter Benjamin, "in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason, nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic."<sup>61</sup> The thought, though modern, was first Paul's.<sup>62</sup> As Slavoj Žižek elaborates,

The past is not simply past, but bears within it its proper utopian promise of a future Redemption; in order to understand a past epoch properly, it is not sufficient to take into account the historical conditions out of which it grew—one also has to take into account the utopian hopes of a Future that were betrayed and crushed by it—that which was “negated,” that which did not happen—so that the past historical reality was the way it was. . . . [W]hat the proper *historical* stance “relativizes” is not the past . . . but, paradoxically, *the present itself*—our present can be conceived only as the outcome (not of what actually happened in the past, but also) of the crushed potentials for the future that were contained in the past.<sup>63</sup>

Just so Paul resisted the perception of the present as the latest stage in a continuous history of accumulation, the inevitable unfolding of destiny and crowning of virtue (as history appears to the victors in the “civilization of wealth” at any particular historical moment—including our own). Rather, ancient promises given to Israel, and long delayed, remained determinative of the future and, for Paul, of the present as well. From an ideological-critical perspective, this is what Paul means in Romans when he speaks of *the world being “subjected” to God in the present*. It is to affirm that the present is not, so to speak, self-sufficient, but is determined by “the crushed potentials for the future that were contained in the past” but that continue, for Paul, in the urgent groaning of a creation in travail. Those heretofore “crushed potentials” are the seed of the future, for as Paul put it, the “gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.” From this perspective, we may understand that the reason Paul does not regard the *ekklēsia* as the agent of history (as the rather flamboyant language of Paul founding “an alternative society” might otherwise imply)<sup>64</sup> is that the *ekklēsiai* in Rome (and elsewhere) had not yet adequately lived into their role of embodying the past.

I quote Žižek again:

We, the “actual” present historical agents, have to conceive of *ourselves* as the materialization of the ghosts of past generations, as the stage in which these past generations retroactively resolve their deadlocks.<sup>65</sup>

—though this formulation does not yet identify the ghosts of the past with sufficient specificity. The “ghosts” haunting Paul’s letter are, in the first place, the “branches broken off,” who remain Israel’s future, and because they are the focus of God’s eternal purposes, the future of the world as well. An imagination—such as the imperial imagination—that the past is truly dead, that the vanquished have no future, is to Paul’s mind unthinkable. It is not some “ethnic prejudice” on Paul’s part that drives him to defend the future of a vanquished Israel: it is the (fundamentally Israelite) vision that because the future belongs to the God who can raise the dead and bring into being what did not exist, it does not in any way depend upon the present.

In a larger perspective this letter is haunted by the “groaning in labor” of creation itself (8:22-23). The “spectrality” that haunts Paul’s thought is the unfulfilled destiny of the world’s liberation. That liberation cannot emerge organically out of the present, which God has (necessarily) subjected to bondage, corruption, and futility, but it is nevertheless inevitable.<sup>66</sup>

There are ghosts enough to haunt us today, not least in the social sites where the interpretation of Paul is at a premium—the churches above all. Responding in astonishment to the meeting of the Latin American Bishops’ Conference in Santo Domingo in 1992, theologian Jon Sobrino decried the “incredible silence” of the proceedings “on the martyrs”:

In Latin America martyrdom is not anecdotal or exceptional, but a massive and indisguisable reality: it is the new thing, the grace, the credential and seal of the most genuine evangelization that has occurred between Medellín and Santo Domingo. . . . To ignore the martyrs really means ignoring the signs of the times.

The words of judgment are not reserved for Latin American bishops alone. “Ignoring the martyrs” is just what is done, lamentably but apparently not to Sobrino’s surprise, in “the world of the North”: a world he describes as “sinful and hypocritical, never expecting to ask forgiveness of anyone” for those killed in wars from Vietnam to Iraq, “nor for the slow death of the Southern half of the planet.”<sup>67</sup> From within the civilization of wealth, a future such as Paul projects is strictly utopian—“the (impossible) ideal of social and political perfection, conceived out of abundance” by the non-poor. But to the wretched of the earth, “‘utopia’ means a dignified and just life for the majorities”; it is “*eu-topia*, that ‘good place’ that must exist.”<sup>68</sup>

It is no clearer for us today than it was in Paul’s day just what the agency is that might bring in the world to come. Paul could assign to the assembly the role of expectant waiting because the agitation of the Spirit within and around the assembly convinced him that the waiting would not be long. We who live in the global North today stand in a very different situation, inescapably caught up in the instrumentality of empire, and readily seduced by it. Our responsiveness to the impulses of the Spirit who groans around us may require our own refusal to be conformed to the present age—to the civilization of capital—but to seek our salvation precisely among the poor, as Sobrino writes; or as Paul put it, by “making our way with the oppressed” (12:16).



The apostle Paul. Byzantine fresco from a monastery in Sopocani, Serbia. Photo © Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.

## Epilogue

### *Paul and the Horizon of the Possible*

I began this book by describing an encounter in Port-au-Prince, a city in which one finds concentrated the crushing misery to which the Haitian people have been subjected for the last century and more. In the year 2000, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization declared Haiti the country with the highest index for "depth of hunger" in the western hemisphere, the third highest in the world.<sup>1</sup> That is a measure of a country's per capita deficit of calorie intake to calorie expenditure, or more prosaically, of the rate at which its people are slowly starving to death.

The statistics with which Mike Davis begins his own recent book, *Planet of Slums*, suggest that the plight of millions of men and women, massed in the desperate slums of Port-au-Prince, is increasingly the planetary norm. We probably already have passed the moment when more human beings on Earth live in cities—the vast majority in slums—than outside of them. Davis asks whether this unprecedented development in human evolution will be ecologically sustainable. The answer, of course, is that for untold millions of human beings, it long has been too late.<sup>2</sup> The problem is not simply one of mass, as we in the privileged global North are tempted to imagine—as if there were simply too many people *elsewhere*. Davis describes the sordid patterns by which the poor have been betrayed, not only by foreign empires and their own governments alike, but also by the international institutions ostensibly established to help them. The poor have been offered patronizing platitudes about self-help that no one would dream of directing to the international corporations that extract their natural resources and exploit their labor. Meanwhile, the strict disciplines of economic austerity are imposed on their governments, requiring the abandonment of programs that might lift their people—to quote deposed Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide—"from misery to poverty with dignity." They are after all a "surplus humanity," virtually "disappeared" from the awareness of the prosperous center.<sup>3</sup>

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued that, given the subtlety and texture of the globalized economy today, "Empire" is a reality that reaches beyond centralized state control and makes it largely irrelevant. The "multitude" of the wretched of the earth will be the agents of countless spontaneous mis-