

“Blasphemed among the Nations”
Pursuing an Anti-imperial “Intertextuality” in Romans

Neil Elliott

The larger project from which this paper is drawn is a book-length reading of Romans as a sustained interaction with themes and tropes of Roman imperial ideology, rather than (as conventionally understood) an interaction with Judaism, the “Jewish doctrine of redemption,” or Jewish “exclusivism” or “ethnocentrism.”¹ The first part of this paper sketches an approach to Romans that adapts the notion of “intertextuality” to the larger rhetorical environment of Roman imperial ideology contemporary with Paul. The second part offers a single “sample” reading using this approach.

Empire and the Obedience of Nations

One premise of what follows is that empires require ideological legitimation.² The arrogance of powerful nations blinds them to the impossibility of achieving through force the willing consent of peoples whose labor and resources they would claim for their own. This impossibility generates tremendous tension within an empire’s ideological system, a contradiction so threatening that it must be suppressed through ideological mechanisms that Fredric Jameson has termed “strategies of containment.”³ The ideology of the Roman Empire, no less than contemporary imperial ideology, was preoccupied with the challenge of “winning the hearts and minds” of conquered peoples.

Examining the constellation of rhetorical *topoi* enlisted by Roman imperial ideology offers a necessary lens for reading Romans. Paul declared that he was charged by God with securing “faithful obedience among the nations” (1:5, my trans.). That statement is a guide to the purpose of the letter, and an indication of the political dimension of Paul’s rhetoric. Because “the obedience of nations” was also the prerogative claimed by the Roman emperor, interpreting Romans requires that we situate Paul’s rhetoric in a wider field of discourses, across different social locations, in which coercion and consent, obedience and subjection, were aligned or

opposed to each other.

Admittedly, the coercive aspect of the empire that Rome built is a delicate subject for some contemporary observers. For example, in his study of “imperial ideology and provincial loyalty in the Roman Empire,” classicist Clifford Ando objects that only an “anachronistic cynicism,” an “arrogance born of luxury,” permits contemporary interpreters to read the literary remains of the ancient Roman elite with suspicion, and to “patronize subject populations” in the ancient world “with deterministic ideologies of rebellion.”⁴ “The manifest success of Rome in and of itself gave propaganda considerable empirical validity,” Ando declares, and pleads for the “sincerity” of the elite texts at our disposal, asking, “what is the ‘topos’ if not the expression, however banal, of a great truth?”⁵

The obvious answer is that the *topoi* of imperial propaganda are the ideologically necessary instruments for representing actual power relationships in the public transcript. An agrarian tributary empire, particularly one as “parasitic” as Rome’s, had specific ideological requirements.⁶ In his discussion of “class struggle on the ideological plane” in the Greco-Roman world, G. E. M. de Ste. Croix discussed the effective combination of “terror and propaganda” in Roman imperialism. He amply documented what he termed “the simplest form of psychological propaganda,” which merely “teaches the governed that they have no real option anyway but to submit; this tends to be intellectually uninteresting, however effective it may have been in practice, and consists merely of the threat of force. It was particularly common, of course, in its application to slaves,”⁷ but was inadequate by itself. Also necessary, and of more interest to Ste. Croix, was “a more sophisticated form of ideological class struggle,” the attempt of the dominant classes to “persuade those they exploited to accept their oppressed condition without protest, if possible even to rejoice in it. . . . The most common form of the type of propaganda we are considering is that which seeks to persuade the poor that they are not really fitted to rule and that this is much better left to their ‘betters.’”⁸

We may read Romans alert to the pervasive role of imperial ideology in its rhetorical environment. But because themes of justice, mercy, faith, and the destiny of peoples were perceived and treated differently in different social locations, we require a method that allows us to measure “the impact of domination on public discourse” in a specific society.⁹ Toward that end, James C. Scott has distinguished between what he calls the public transcript, that is, the zone of direct interaction between dominant and subordinate classes, and the “hidden transcripts” of the subordinate, on one hand, and the “hidden transcript of the dominant,” on the

other (see Fig. 1).

**Fig. 1. “Hidden” and “Public Transcripts”
as described by James C. Scott**

Hidden transcript of the dominant	Public transcript (with roles and expectations for subordinate and dominant classes)	Hidden transcript of the subordinate
Distinct from the role of the powerful in the public transcript; “hidden” because constrained by prevalent ideology.	Expressed in the “public” sphere as this is defined by the dominant classes, the public transcript includes roles assigned to the weak and the dominant, the powerless and the powerful alike; yet these are under constant negotiation in “the most vital arena for ordinary conflict, for everyday forms of class struggle.”	Distinct from the role of the subordinate in the public transcript; “hidden” because constrained by coercive force.

Scott’s work focuses on contemporary societies (especially modern Malaysia), but biblical scholars have seen the worth of applying his categories to the early Roman Empire as well. It is precisely the difference between the solemn assurances the elite gave their subjects regarding their altruism and benevolence, and the candor with which they admitted their rapacity to one another in private, that allows us to distinguish the hidden transcript of the powerful from the public transcript.¹⁰ The hidden transcript of the dominant is “an artifact of the exercise of power. It contains that discourse—gestures, speech, practices—which is excluded from the public transcript by the ideological limits within which domination is cast.” The powerful can speak with candor when they know they are alone among their peers “and can let their hair down.” Such hidden transcripts are of particular value because the full *public* transcript offers only occasional, accidental glimpses into the actual motives of the powerful; as Scott observes, “dominant groups often have much to conceal, and typically also have the wherewithal to conceal what they wish.”¹¹

As to the “hidden transcript” of the subordinate in the first century C.E., we recognize that expressions of outright defiance to Roman rule were rare, desperate, and doomed. Among Judeans, we gain a few oblique glimpses of anti-Roman rhetoric from Josephus, who writes for his own apologetic purposes decades after the disastrous revolt of 66-70 C.E. His agenda in presenting anti-Roman attitudes as a “Fourth Philosophy,” an improper deviation from the three authentic “philosophies” of Judaism (those of the Pharisees, Saducees, and Essenes), is well

known.¹² Josephus acknowledges (through the voice of Agrippa, seeking to calm the populace of Jerusalem) that “there are many who wax eloquent on the insolence of the procurators and pronounce pompous panegyrics on liberty.” But Josephus declines to provide specimens of this “eloquence,” preferring to give space instead to his own oratorical talents in the cause of submission.¹³

The paucity of direct first-hand evidence is precisely what we should expect on Scott’s analysis of the effects of domination upon discourse. Unable to express their resistance openly, subordinate groups must ordinarily rely on strategies of indirection and disguise, or else seek the safety of anonymity. There is abundant indirect evidence for “a permanent current of hostility” on the part of the masses in Rome to “senatorial misrule and exploitation,” from the time of the Republic on.¹⁴ The occasional surprise expressed by the elite when a gesture of courage sparked an explosion of popular unrest suggests that the common people more usually were constrained to suppress their dissatisfaction.¹⁵ Defiance surfaced in strategies of anonymity that Scott calls the “everyday forms of class struggle.”¹⁶ Strategies of “political disguise” included graffiti, effigies anonymously erected in public,¹⁷ and spontaneous street demonstrations (termed “riots” by the elite).¹⁸ The alternatives available to subordinate groups are more complex, then, than a naked choice between silence and defiance. What Scott calls the “strategic uses of anonymity,” including collective action and the anonymity of the crowd, reflects “a popular tactical wisdom developed in conscious response to the political constraints realistically faced,” that is, the constant threat of violent suppression.¹⁹ In the years Romans was written, forms of anonymous protest directed at Nero in particular—anonymous jokes circulating through the capital, graffiti appearing on public walls overnight—mocked the key claims of imperial propaganda, ridiculing Nero’s extravagant building projects, mocking his claim to be descended from the ancient Trojan hero Aeneas, and after 59, taunting him as his mother’s murderer as well,²⁰ despite his calculated efforts in the theater (ably discussed by Edward Champlin) to identify that act as the embodiment of mythic themes of justified matricide.²¹

The Dialectic of Defiance and Caution

Scott’s analysis explains why the ancient sources upon which we must depend for a history “from below” offer only indirect testimony. The frontier between the public and hidden transcripts, he writes, is a zone “of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate – not a solid wall. The capacity of dominant groups to prevail – though never totally – in defining and

constituting what counts as the public transcript and what as offstage is . . . no small measure of their power. The unremitting struggle over such boundaries is perhaps the most vital arena for ordinary conflict, for everyday forms of class struggle.”²²

His insight is hardly a modern discovery. No less erudite an observer than Philo of Alexandria provided an analysis very similar to Scott’s when he contrasted the “untimely frankness” (*parrhēsia akairon*) of those who resisted Rome openly, but at an inopportune time, with the caution (*eulabeia*) that is more usually appropriate to the public square. “When the times are right,” Philo explains, “it is good to set ourselves against the violence of our enemies and subdue it; but when the circumstances do not present themselves”— as is usually the case in history, Scott suggests — “the safe course is to stay quiet.”²³ “Staying quiet” clearly implies the self-restraint that keeps an oppositional transcript hidden. Typically, expressions of protest or resistance in the Judean literature that has come down to us are couched in veiled or muted terms. They offer glimpses into what we may presume, following Scott’s argument, was a deeper, richer hidden transcript of resentment, the subterranean resistance that ultimately erupted in rebellion. Such for example was the oblique invective of the first-century B.C.E. *Psalms of Solomon*, where the arrogance of Pompeii was condemned without naming him except as “the sinner” (*ho hamartōlos*) and his troops as “foreign nations” (*ethn ē*); or again, the esoteric biblical interpretation of the Habakkuk Peshar from Qumran, which condemned the violence and arrogance of the Romans as those who “eat up all the peoples like an insatiable vulture,” but only under the symbolic name *Kittim*. Philo offered allegorical interpretations of scripture, reading biblical characters as figures of tyranny (the sons of Cheth in Gen. 23:7; Joseph himself in Genesis 37).²⁴ When he complained elsewhere of the breathtaking sadism of Roman tax-gatherers in Egypt, he did so in carefully vague or even evasive language, referring to “a person” (*tis*) who was put in charge of tax gathering “a little time ago.”²⁵ Following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, we find the same bitter condemnation of Rome in the veiled allegorical symbolism of the apocalypses.²⁶

The “Public transcript” in Nero’s Rome

How are we to distinguish “public” and “hidden transcripts” in ancient literature? It is vitally important—not least because of the current prominence of Scott’s method among some biblical interpreters—to address the question of method. The phenomena Scott discusses as “hidden” and “public transcripts” are not aspects inhering in texts as such, so that if we only

spent sufficient time staring at a text (like Romans) through the right methodological lens we could confirm its character as one or the other. *No ancient text spontaneously reveals itself as a “hidden transcript,”* and sheer assertion that one text or another is such a hidden transcript will not convince reasonable contemporary readers. As Cynthia Briggs Kittredge rightly warns, in order to apply Scott’s work to biblical studies we necessarily depend on a *historical reconstruction* of a particular historical context, and of the way in which power constrained the discourse of social groups in that context.²⁷ We must also rely on *comparisons* of actual contemporary texts that show telltale fissures between the public contestation of power and statements that vary from the normative expectations of the public transcript. (The larger project from which this essay is drawn involves repeated *comparisons* of different “texts” contemporary with Paul’s letter.)

Along with important works by S. R. F. Price on symbol and ritual of the imperial cult and by Paul Zanker on the ideological purpose of mass-manufactured and distributed imagery, Edward Champlin’s recent study of Nero’s age allows us to say a great deal about the cultural environment in the city to which Paul wrote. Champlin emphasizes the rich repertoire of statuary, monument, inscription, and (of special relevance with regard to this emperor) theater, all conveying

a single, powerful message regarding the inevitability and rightness of the imperial regime. This cultural repertoire surrounded the observer with highly charged images of the gods and of illustrious heroes of the past, images displayed in every public corner of the city of Augustus, replicated in private works of art, and elaborated by the poets, orators, and historians of the day. . . . [D]aily life was permeated by such examples from the past, all dedicated to comment on the present. It was customary to present Rome’s leaders wrapped in the deeds and virtues of figures from myth and legend, and the Roman people were thoroughly accustomed to read and appreciate the messages they bore.²⁸

In this “public transcript,” one voice in that contest was clear and powerful. Nero (or rather, his speechwriter, Seneca) provides one of the most vivid expressions of the imperial understanding of the necessity of rule. Looking out over “this vast throng—discordant, factious, and unruly, ready to run riot alike for the destruction of itself and others if it should break its

yoke”—the emperor realizes that without his benevolent leadership, “no part of the wide world can prosper.” Just as the body depends upon the governance of the mind,

in the same way this vast throng, encircling the life of one man, is ruled by his spirit, guided by his reason, and would crush and cripple itself with its own power if it were not upheld by wisdom. . . . For he is the bond by which the commonwealth is united, the breath of life, which these many thousands draw, who in their own strength would be only a burden to themselves and the prey of others if the great mind of the empire should be withdrawn. . . . Such a calamity would be the destruction of the Roman peace, such a calamity will force the fortune of a mighty people to its downfall. Just so long will this people be free from that danger as it shall know how to submit to the rein; but if ever it shall tear away the rein, . . . the end of this city’s rule will be one with the end of her obedience.²⁹

And what of other voices? That a deranged eighteen-year-old could be described as the “mind of the empire” says something about the tone of public deliberation in Nero’s day. Champlin’s observations about the constricted sphere of public discourse in Rome bear out Scott’s argument regarding the constraints of power in the public transcript, which remains a zone of contestation. After the accelerated consolidation of power in the single figure of the emperor, the marginalization of the first two “public” zones, public meetings and elections, meant that by the mid-first century C.E., “the outlet provided by the games became even more important.”

The games and the theater were the remaining public venues where the Roman people could take advantage of large numbers and individual anonymity to proclaim their views about current public issues, loudly and directly, to their leaders. It was generally understood that things could be said within the special confines of a theater, circus, or arena which could not be said elsewhere. . . . This outlet provided by the games became even more important under the principate, as one-man rule stifled republican politics, and the institutions of debate (the public meetings) and voting (the

assemblies) faded away.³⁰

Perhaps this “outlet” was allowed to continue precisely because the role assigned to the people had become so tightly circumscribed: in Champlin’s words, “the games lent themselves to a ritualized dialogue between the emperor and his people.”³¹ In this “ritualized dialogue,” Nero presented himself as the champion of the people, attentive, at least theatrically, to their voices.³² But the constraints imposed on the public transcript meant that direct dissent was suppressed.

In the last public site where the people’s voice was still heard, albeit in a highly stylized fashion, Champlin speaks of an “abundance of evidence,” from the late Republic onward, “that Roman theatrical audiences were extraordinarily quick to hear the words spoken and to see the actions presented on stage as offering pointed commentary on contemporary life.”³³ Playwrights and actors alike changed or read lines so as to produce a subversive double entendre; equally important, audiences occasionally responded to double entendres even if these had not been intended. Champlin concludes that

This remarkable sensitivity on the part of the audience underscores the heightening of awareness within a Roman theater: audiences *expected* to find contemporary relevance in the productions; performers *expected* to have their pointed remarks and actions caught, interpreted, and appreciated. . . . In short, the Roman people were accustomed to seeing their rulers everywhere presented as figures of well-known myths, and they were accustomed to performances on stage that commented directly on their own contemporary concerns. . . . Rome by Nero’s day was a city thoroughly accustomed to the widespread, programmatic representation of myth in public life, and to the deep implication of the audience in theatrical performance.³⁴

Champlin’s observations point to an important aspect of the immediate environment in which Paul’s letter was read, or rather, performed,³⁵ in Rome. Given the constraints operative in the public transcript, we might expect *direct* political commentary at odds with the prevailing order to be either rare or nonexistent there; yet for that very reason, the “remarkable sensitivity” of the Roman populace to *oblique* commentary on current events is all the more important.

But on what basis might we identify anything Paul says as bearing, however indirectly, on contemporary events?

The Question of criteria

In his landmark discussion of “intertextual echo” in Paul’s letters, Richard B. Hays identified seven “tests” for reasonably identifying allusions in one text (like Romans) to another (like Isaiah or the Psalms).³⁶ These tests are just as applicable to the themes of myth and ideology that so charged the air of the imperial capital.

1. Under the rubric *availability*, Hays asks, “Was the proposed source of the echo available to the author and/or original readers?” We can have no doubt that through mass dissemination by means of imagery, ceremonial, and panegyric, themes of imperial propaganda saturated the cities of the Roman empire. Indeed, recognizing the overwhelming “availability” of imperial themes in Paul’s environment, we may wonder whether the energy devoted to determining how conversant Paul’s non-Judean hearers were with the Septuagint might better be directed to another symbolic repertoire with which they were *undoubtedly* more familiar. (Hays himself regards just this question as ‘intriguing’ and worthy of further investigation.³⁷)

2. Under *historical plausibility*, Hays asks, “Could Paul have intended the alleged meaning effect? Could his readers have understood it?” Just here Champlin’s observations about the “remarkable sensitivity” of Roman audiences to irony, double entendre, and other forms of indirect commentary must be an important consideration.

3. Under *volume*, Hays is concerned with “the degree of explicit repetition of words or syntactical patterns, but other factors may also be relevant: how distinctive or prominent is the precursor text?” Here the case with regard to themes from imperial ideology is necessarily much murkier, because Paul neither quotes nor cites imperial declarations (though the contemporary recognition of an allusion to official propaganda in 1 Thess. 5:3 bears note), nor does he quote from recognizable Roman works like the *Aeneid*. Hays’s reference to “other factors” is therefore all the more important. Themes that loom large in Romans—justice, mercy, piety, and virtue—were *overwhelmingly* “distinctive and prominent” in Roman imperial ideology as well.

4. Hays considers another criterion, the *history of interpretation*, “one of the least reliable guides for interpretation” precisely because the interpretation of Paul’s letters has been so long dominated by theological agendas. We are nevertheless at a turning point in the history of interpretation in which political themes and allusions in Paul’s writings are increasingly

recognized.³⁸

Other criteria named by Hays—

1. *recurrence*,
2. *thematic coherence*, and
3. *satisfaction*—

are more subjective criteria involving the interpreter's sense of Paul's theology as a whole.

There is at least a *prima facie* case for reading Romans with the same "remarkable sensitivity" to political connotations that was evident in the Roman theater. Indeed, given that Paul's letter would have been read in a much less surveilled social site, we may suppose that the sort of expectations that Champlin describes for the theater might have been heightened there.

A Test Case: the *topos* "Mercy" (*clementia*)

"We are blasphemed among the nations," Paul protested (3:8). The Christian interpretative tradition has long read the wider context, in which Paul engages an interlocutor in a diatribal conversation, as an effort to accuse or "indict" a Jew (and, thus, Judaism) for arrogance, hypocrisy, moral presumption, and/or a smug ethnocentrism. Given that assumption, it becomes difficult to identify just who "we" are—Paul and his Jewish interlocutor? Paul and his Christ-believing audience? Paul and his apostolic colleagues who advocate a law-free mission?

In his recent magisterial commentary, Robert Jewett manages to conflate all these possibilities in what he calls "a wonderful piece of rhetorical jujitsu" on the part of the apostle. Though Paul is (in Jewett's view) still engaged in an antagonistic diatribal address to a Jew (since 2:17), here he "shrewdly brings his audience into the dialogue": "we" means "we believers," who are being slandered by people *like the Jewish antagonist* ("the insidious interlocutor").³⁹ This alleged "jujitsu" resembles more the tangle of a rhetorical game of Twister. The Roman non-Judean audience is expected to understand (on this view) that Paul is addressing an antagonistic Jew, who is addressed in the first-person plural at 3:1 and 3:9, but who is *not* included in the first-person plural of 3:8, where they (the non-Judean audience) *are* included in an antagonistic accusation *against* the "insidious" Jew. Just this tangle is the inevitable result when we make the a priori assumption that the purpose of Romans is to *defend* the law-free mission against Jewish antagonism.

I contend instead that the “slander” to which Paul refers is one that he shares *with his Jewish interlocutor*, who is *not* his antagonist. This interchange is of a piece with the larger rhetorical address since 2:17, which is directed (I argue) *not* against a Jewish *antagonist*, but to a Jewish conversation *partner* in an effort to convince a non-Judean audience that accountability to God is universal—and thus includes them as well. (That is the explicit argument in 6:1-15.) The rhetorical burden in the earlier chapters, Romans 2—3, is to address the (mistaken) perception that mercy, especially on God’s part, constitutes an exemption from accountability (explicitly in 2:3-5).

“Mercy” in imperial view

Upon Nero’s accession, one of the ways he exercised his own personal prerogative as emperor was to extend “clemency” to those who had suffered punishment or exile at the hands of his stepfather. These included Judeans whom Claudius had expelled from Rome, under circumstances that (as we shall see) tell us more about Roman policy than about the character or conduct of the city’s Judean population. Almost all commentators on Romans today cite this expulsion as part of the background for Paul’s letter. Normally this has meant explaining why the “Gentiles” in the Roman churches would have had reason to look down on their Judean neighbors. When some interpreters go further, however, to attribute failure or malfeasance to these neighbors, they imply that the Judeans had deserved Claudius’s severe response. Such characterizations of the Judean population perpetuate ancient perceptions on the part of hostile Romans in Paul’s own day, implying that Judeans were undeserving of the mercy Nero had deigned to show them.

It is just this perception that Paul opposed already in Romans. Relying on familiar techniques appropriate to the diatribe, he elicits from a fictitious Judean character the strident denial of any presumption on *divine* mercy (2:17-24). But if Judeans, who have been given tremendous privileges by God, cannot presume on these to exempt them from accountability before God, how much less can others! To presume that divine punishment long withheld is evidence of God’s indulgence would be a disastrous mistake, and one that Paul seeks to prevent the Roman assemblies from making.

But just that presumption was ready at hand *in the ideology of Roman imperialism*.

The Mercy of the Augusti

From the perspective of imperial ideology, mercy is the prerogative of the powerful, appropriate only when the object of mercy is truly powerless and submissive (as Slavoj Žižek explains, reflecting on Western portrayals of worthy and unworthy victims in the former Yugoslavia⁴⁰). The logic is both hypocritical and one-sided. Imperial elites claim a monopoly on humanism, expecting the rest of the world to sympathize above all with their own suffering (as Gilbert Achcar observes, reflecting on the moral weight denied hundreds of thousands of Iraqis killed by U.S. sanctions in the ten years before Sept. 11, 2001). Sympathy is due “only for people like themselves.” Because empires subsist from the domination of other peoples, imperial mercy can only be expressed along a clear “dividing line between those who must live and those who must die.”⁴¹ Within the logic of empire, “mercy” is not something due to others under any obligation that might present a restraint on the exertion of power.

In Paul’s day, Roman imperial ideology construed “mercy” as the sole prerogative of those who enjoyed absolute power. If for Cicero it was self-evident that the Romans were destined to “multiply our wealth, to extend our boundaries . . . to rule over as many subjects as possible,” it was equally incumbent upon them to “spare all men, to consider the interests of the whole human race, to give everyone his due, and not to touch sacred or public property, or that which belongs to others.” Similarly Virgil described the peculiar “arts” of the Roman people as *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*, “to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud.”⁴² There was no contradiction, since mercy was by definition the right of the conqueror over those who submitted, just as the insolent who dared to resist earned their chosen fate. Clemency was the practice of “moderation toward a defeated enemy, provided the latter was not recalcitrant or heinous . . . but submissive to the *pax Romana*.”⁴³ Given the options of destruction and subjection, the vanquished would naturally be grateful to be spared (an ancient expectation with contemporary parallels).⁴⁴

Clementia was “the operative principle after ongoing conquests and submission of other peoples,” Karl Galinsky observes. It was particularly associated with Octavius, who promised the Senate that he would conduct himself “in a mild and humane way,” after the manner of his gentle father, Julius Caesar. (Galinsky goes on to note that this was “not the way things turned out to be,” at least until Octavius had destroyed his chief rival.)⁴⁵ *Clementia* was one of the virtues celebrated on the golden shield which the Senate subsequently donated to Augustus, and one of the chief virtues of which the emperor boasted in the *Res Gestae*: “I undertook many civil

and foreign wars by land and sea throughout the world, and as victor I spared the lives of all citizens who asked for mercy. When foreign peoples could safely be pardoned I preferred to preserve rather than to exterminate them” (3.1-2). After Augustus, *clementia* became a standard claim on the part of his successors. When a Parthian delegation came to beg Claudius to give them as king a hostage who had been trained in the Roman art of government, the emperor agreed, then proceeded to give the hostage king one last lecture. He should exercise mercy and justice among his new subjects, “virtues all the more welcome” because (Claudius presumed) the Parthians would have had no experience of either before tasting Roman magnanimity.⁴⁶

Upon Claudius’s death (likely at the hands of Nero’s mother), Nero promised the Senate he would reign with a mercy surpassing any of his predecessors except Augustus (in proof of which he proceeded to lavish wealth upon veterans and Senators).⁴⁷ The speech that Seneca wrote for the young Nero one or two years before Romans was written, “On Mercy” (*De clementia*), is widely credited with having had a moderating effect on the young emperor. (It might also simply have been the case that Nero’s excesses grew to be far more obvious after he required his advisor to commit suicide, causing the early years to appear milder in comparison.) *De clementia* combines lofty rhetoric with abject flattery and cold political calculation. It addresses Nero as embodying “the great mind of the empire,” calm and benevolent, without whom the great irrational herd who are the people of Rome would quickly fling themselves to destruction. He surpasses all his ancestors, including the divine Augustus, by having come to power without shedding a drop of blood (no mention of Claudius’s fate darkens the mood). Nero will be the most beloved of Caesars if he continues to present himself to the people as the most blameless; the quickest way to the people’s hearts is through the application of clemency.⁴⁸ But mercy must be dispensed in moderation. Seneca is swift to admit the common wisdom that “mercy upholds the worst class of men, since it is superfluous unless there has been some crime,” it being self-evident that Roman justice sufficed to preserve the innocent. “An indiscriminate and general mercy” will undermine public morality. The people must be kept under the rein. Seneca recognizes the usefulness of terror, expressed in the slogan “Let them hate, if only they fear.” But he played on Nero’s “desire for popularity, and his fear and insecurity,” in urging the sovereign to seek a balance of terror and mercy, love and fear mixed together.⁴⁹

Clementia was, then, the indulgence shown by a sovereign to his unworthy subjects, an undeserved favor that highlighted his moral superiority to them. Two particular occasions on

which imperial clemency was proclaimed bear directly on the occasion of Romans. One is Claudius's order suppressing civil unrest in Alexandria in 41 C.E. The other is Nero's order, probably in 54 C.E., rescinding his stepfather's expulsion of Judeans from the city of Rome.

In the wake of what has been called the first anti-Jewish pogrom, the concerted massacres in Alexandria in 38-41, Claudius moved swiftly to put down the violence. Two of the Greek leaders who had been most outspoken in their antagonism to Rome were brought to trial and sentenced to death. Claudius's decree to the antagonists in Alexandria is widely read as favorable to the Judean cause—although it falls short of granting them citizenship—because Josephus has transmitted a version of the decree that obscures the civic status assigned to the Judeans.⁵⁰ The more likely authentic text is less favorable to the Judeans, however, and speaks volumes about the imperial perception of the trouble:⁵¹

With regard to the responsibility for the disturbances and rioting, or rather, to speak the truth, the war against the Jews . . . I have not wished to make an exact inquiry, but I harbor within me a store of immutable indignation against those who renewed the conflict. . . .

An “exact inquiry” might have identified those responsible for massacre and mayhem and held them to account, something about which the emperor apparently could not be further troubled. His “immutable indignation” is directed against “those who renewed the conflict,” that is, the Judeans, but nothing is said here about the individuals who began it, or the Roman governor's dereliction of duty, or the previous emperor's willful aggravation of the situation.⁵² So far as Claudius was concerned, the root cause of all the violence was the “mutual enmity” of two ethnic groups. Its solution, plainly enough, was religious tolerance, enforced by the threat that an ordinarily benign and merciful emperor might resort to force:

I merely say that, unless you stop this destructive and obstinate mutual enmity, I shall be forced to show what a benevolent ruler can be when he is turned to righteous indignation.

Claudius warned the Alexandrians “to behave gently and kindly toward the Judeans who have inhabited the same city for many years,” and not to dishonor their religious customs. But he warned the Judeans “not to aim at more than they have previously had”—that is, citizenship—“and not in the future to send two embassies as if they lived in two cities, a thing which has never been done before”—an unseemly gesture that had proved just what outsiders they were to the city.

Nor are they to bring in or invite Judeans coming from Syria or Egypt, or I shall be forced to conceive graver suspicions. If they disobey, I shall proceed against them in every way as fomenting a common plague for the whole world.

This episode and its dénouement are instructive, first in regard to the malleability of “ethnicity” during this period. If, in the provinces, participation in the imperial cult held out for the ambitious the prospect of “becoming Roman, staying Greek,”⁵³ some at least of Philo’s contemporaries sought to “become Alexandrian, staying Judean.”⁵⁴ The Judeans of Alexandria thought it reasonable to seek recognition as both Alexandrian citizens and members of the Judean *politeia*. Some of their neighbors disagreed, for reasons that sprang as much from their antipathy toward the Caesars and their jealousy of citizenship—“the primary irritant”⁵⁵—as from any hostility toward the Judeans themselves. They posed their opposition in terms of the Judeans’ unsuitability to participate in the Roman order. Their supposed origins as lower-class Egyptians and their contempt for the rites of others showed that the Judeans could never take their place among enlightened peoples who accepted the Roman gods alongside their own. It is not enough, then, to read the catastrophe in Alexandria as an episode of “ethnic” tension between Greeks and Judeans: this was a case of rivalry among colonized peoples jockeying against each other for the favor of the colonial power.

Also notable is the imperial construal of the situation. Claudius knew better than to accept the Alexandrians’ posing of the issues. Far from a squabble between ethnic groups, the anti-Judaic bloc had stirred up trouble in clear defiance of Roman policy, attempting to triangulate with Flaccus against the Judeans. Claudius rejected the strategy and condemned its architects.⁵⁶ But he also warned the Judeans not to import troublemaking compatriots from Syria, indicating that from the Roman point of view, Judeans were, just like the Alexandrians, potentially troublesome residents of the Eastern provinces who must learn their place in the Roman order.

Note, finally, the emperor’s claim of unparalleled benevolence. Regardless of the effects of Roman policy; regardless of whatever miseries and injustices were left without redress, it was to be understood that he had Alexandria’s best interests at heart. Claudius would hear no more of the rival groups’ claims on imperial justice; by definition, the settlement he imposed was final, and merciful.

Rome, 49 C.E.

We do not know whether, or to what extent, the violence in Alexandria was felt among the Judeans of Rome. We may well imagine they were quite aware of what had happened, and felt the blows of Gaius's capriciousness just as keenly as did Philo and his delegation to the emperor. We do know a deep current of anti-Judean antagonism ran through the Roman aristocracy, going back at least to Cicero who had described them as a people "born to servitude." We know that in 19 C.E. Tiberius had deported four thousand Judeans to Sardinia to fight pirates, and expelled the rest of the Judean community from Rome; Josephus explains that this was an overreaction to a notorious scandal in which a few Judeans had swindled an aristocrat's wife out of a great deal of money by posing as agents of the Jerusalem Temple.⁵⁷ Philo attributed Tiberius's hostility to the overweening influence of his wickedly anti-Judaic advisor Sejanus, who wished "to root out the people."⁵⁸ But it is also possible the expulsion was simply a routine imperial reaction to unrest. There were riots that year protesting grain shortages, and Tiberius may simply have struck at a convenient target, a minority population both conspicuous and vulnerable, in order to make an example of them and thus restore law and order in the streets.⁵⁹ And we know that the anti-Judaic slanders that Philo's opponents, Apion and Chaameron, brought into Gaius's court thrived among the Roman aristocracy for decades to come. Chaameron, after all, later tutored the emperor Nero; and decades later, Josephus was compelled to address his apology for the Judean people to their chief literary adversary in his work *Against Apion*.

H. Dixon Slingerland has offered a compelling alternative explanation for the Roman expulsion, based not in specific Jewish actions that require explanation in terms of putative Jewish characteristics, but in Roman policy. Claudius continued his predecessors' policy of seeking to control Judeans and adherents to other foreign "superstitions" in the city. As Leonard Victor Rutgers has shown, the impulse behind this imperial policy was not a religious concern but a political one. "It was quite common for the Roman authorities to expel easily identifiable groups from Rome in times of political turmoil. Such expulsions were ordered not for religious reasons, but rather to maintain law and order." "Rome intervened because there were disturbances and not because it wanted to meddle in the internal affairs of the Jewish community," or any other community, in Rome. Indeed, Rutgers offers, the Judeans may have been "just a convenient group whose expulsion could serve as an example to reestablish peace and quiet among the city populace at large." Different Roman emperors or magistrates held anti-

Judaic views, but Rutgers argues that

at best, a dislike for Judaism served to justify on a subconscious level decisions that had essentially been reached on the basis of administrative and legal considerations. . . . Rome's measures concerning the Jews had straightforward political causes.⁶⁰

When Judeans who had been expelled from the city by Claudius in 49 were allowed to return by Nero, soon after his accession, they returned to a city in which much of the community life they had previously known was in disarray.⁶¹ In an influential 1970 article Wolfgang Wiefel catalogued the expressions of contempt leveled against Judeans by their Roman neighbors in the latter half of the first century C.E. They were scorned as beggars and fortune tellers infesting the public parks; they scraped by on a miserable diet, apparently without adequate access to decent kosher food.⁶² They were derided as “the weak” in the city.⁶³ Although there is no reason to attribute these characterizations to the effect of the expulsion under Claudius alone, we may reasonably assume that event, and the subsequent return of former exiles, made a lasting impression. While officially Judeans still enjoyed the emperor's favor, Nero's own advisor, Seneca, complained that noxious Judean practices had spread among the non-Judean populace, a development he found doubly offensive since “the conquered [*victi*] have given their laws to the conquerors [*victores*].”⁶⁴ Given that the assemblies to which Paul wrote were “surrounded by a society marked by its aversion and rejection of everything Jewish,” Wiefel found it understandable that in Romans Paul should strive to instill a different attitude toward Israel among his audience.

But we can say more about the attitudes Paul struggled against in this letter. As we have seen, in 41 C.E. Claudius portrayed his severe posture toward the Judeans of Alexandria as milder than they deserved, due to his benevolence. Upon Claudius's death in 54 C.E., Nero set himself to conspicuous reversals of his stepfather's policies as a way of demonstrating his superior clemency. One of these gestures, we may safely presume, was to allow the exiled Judeans to return to Rome.⁶⁵

Given all that we have seen regarding the representation of imperial clemency in official imagery and propaganda, we may hazard an informed guess regarding the perception of this action among the Judeans' neighbors. First, we know nothing of any efforts on Nero's part to exonerate these exiles of any accusations, formal or informal, that Claudius had raised against them, or to increase the esteem in which they were generally held. He allowed them to return,

after all, not to improve their lot, but to enhance his own prestige as a benevolent and merciful ruler. But Seneca himself had reminded Nero that in the common view, “mercy upholds the worst class of men,” and that “an indiscriminate and general mercy” would undermine Nero’s credibility.⁶⁶ We can imagine that non-Judeans in Rome would have looked upon these returning exiles not only as the wretched and broken people that they appeared, but *as the undeserving beneficiaries of imperial largesse*, troublemakers who had escaped being held accountable for their misdeeds. They were, in Seneca’s phrase, “the worst class of men,” being upheld by misdirected mercy.

Paul’s stylized conversation with a Judean in Romans 2–3 is a rhetorical device aimed precisely at combatting this prejudicial conclusion on the part of his *non-Judean* audience. “We are blasphemed among the nations,” Paul protests (Rom. 3:8). That protest helps us to understand the role of this rhetorical dialogue within the letter’s argumentation.

A Warning against Presuming on Mercy (Romans 2–3)

One effect of Paul’s rhetoric in the beginning of Romans is to drive a wedge between his hearers and the sort of arrogant presumption that characterized the imperial house (1:18-32). In a stylized second-person address to a fictitious interlocutor, Paul then warns against a self-deluding hypocrisy that presumes upon God’s mercy as an escape from accountability to God. *All* are accountable to God and will be judged according to their works (2:1-16). It becomes clear as the letter progresses that this fictitious address has a very real hortatory burden: Paul warns his Roman audience against misconstruing their status “in Christ” as a presumption on God’s mercy. The “expiation” achieved in Christ’s blood is not an expression of divine forbearance, but an *end* to God’s forbearance of *previous* sins that were “passed over” but will be no longer (3:21-26). *Now*, God justifies—sets persons right—out of the faithfulness of Christ in which they have been made to participate; this demonstrates God’s justice in a way previous divine forbearance did not, as the purpose clauses in 3:25-26 make clear.⁶⁷ To similar effect, Paul contrasts two christological schemes in Romans 5:12-21 in order to emphasize that what God achieved in Christ was *more than* relief from the penalty of trespasses; it was the dawn of a new dominion, the “reign” of grace (5:21).⁶⁸ The consequences he draws out in 6:1-23 are specifically relevant to those who have been baptized into Christ: they are not to misconstrue the grace they have received as an opportunity to presume on divine mercy, to “continue in sin that grace may abound.”

Here we may compare Paul’s rhetoric with the way Roman imperial propaganda presented the “clemency” of the Augusti as the exercise of a sovereign’s prerogative toward the *undeserving* in such a way as to redound to his own glory. Paul speaks similarly of God’s mercy as the sheer, unilateral initiative of a sovereign toward those who do not deserve mercy (3:23-24; 5:6-8). But where Seneca advised the emperor to be judicious in his granting of amnesty, out of concern that too-great leniency would undermine the public perception of the emperor’s power, Paul insists that God’s “kindness and forbearance” are the expression of God’s power. God’s mercy produces repentance, faithfulness, and obedience. It cannot therefore compromise God’s justice; to the contrary, God’s mercy is the public manifestation of God’s justice—*insofar as those who have received mercy are thereby moved to respond in obedience*.

Another comparison is even more central to the larger purpose of the letter. We may set the perception of the emperor’s clemency shown toward Judeans—the undeserving *victi*, in the view of imperial ideology—over against the conversation Paul stages with a Judean in 2:17–3:20.

Paul’s dialogue with “a Judean”

When Romans has been read as a treatise on salvation, this apostrophe has been read as an indictment of “the Jew,” intended to show both that the Jew needs Paul’s gospel as much as the “Gentile” and that the Jew is in greater danger of resisting the gospel because of a false presumption. This “characteristic Jewish boast” must be “demolished” by proving that the Jew is just as guilty of disobedience as the sinners described in 1:18-32.⁶⁹ Although virtually all interpreters have read the larger purpose in 1:18–3:20 as establishing the universal accountability described in 3:19 (“so that the whole world may be accountable to God”) many have seen Paul’s particular target as the boastful and arrogant *Jew*. “What is argued [in 1:18–3:20] is the equal status of Jew and Gentile under sin,” J. Christiaan Beker wrote; but “what is *presumed* is the self-evident character of the Gentile under sin. . . . If it can be shown that the catena of Scripture in 3:11-18 applies to the Jews, *then* it is self-evident that the whole world is accountable to God as well, for Gentiles are by nature sinners.”⁷⁰ But this reading, based in part on a mistranslation of 3:19, misses the point of Paul’s argument. It is hard to imagine the Jew who would have been surprised by Paul’s citing Jewish scripture to argue for Jewish accountability to Israel’s God. Paul’s point—addressed to a non-Judean audience—is that Jewish scriptures establish God’s claim on the whole world, *not* just upon Judeans. All the world—not just Judeans—are

accountable to God.⁷¹

Paul's stylized address to a Judean in 2:17–3:9 is meant not to indict the Jews or to criticize Judaism, but to enlist a fellow Judean as a witness in order to make an important point to his non-Judean audience. Here it is crucially important that we understand how Paul's use of diatribal techniques functions.⁷²

No one has done more to help us understand Paul's use of diatribal techniques in Romans 2–3 than Stanley K. Stowers. In his 1981 study *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, Stowers reviewed and offered corrections of previous work on the social setting, hortatory and instructive purposes, and rhetorical techniques of the diatribe. In *A Rereading of Romans* (1994), he applied these and other insights to a full-scale reading of the letter. As we saw in chapter 2, Stowers ably demonstrated that the sudden rhetorical turn to second-person-singular address at Rom. 2:1 (“you are without excuse, whoever you are, O mortal, when you judge”) was not a rhetorical “trap” for the Jew, but fit a broad pattern of moral exhortation in which speech-in-character was used as “a personal indictment of any of the audience to whom it might apply. . . . The address in 2:1ff. reaches out to sharply indict those who have pretensions of being on a different plane morally.” Stowers consequently declared it “anachronistic and completely unwarranted to think that Paul has only the Jew in mind in 2:1-5 or that he characterizes the typical Jew.”⁷³

In contrast, in 2:17-24 Paul clearly has “the Jew” in mind, and just here many interpreters have found the exegetical smoking gun confirming that part, at least, of Paul's purpose in the letter is to come against a distinctly Jewish boastfulness and presumption on God's mercy. Here again, however, Stowers's insights into the function of diatribal techniques sufficed to establish, to the contrary,

1. that the use of direct address with a fictitious person, including speech-in-character, did *not* mean the letter's actual audience was now in view. Paul is not addressing the attitudes of actual Judean opponents in his Roman audience;
2. that the interpreter's task was to understand what the use of this technique was meant to accomplish *with the letter's explicit non-Judean audience*; and
3. that Paul's target was not “Judaism in general”; therefore “it is grossly misleading to generalize this fictitious address to a critique of Judaism.”⁷⁴ Stowers rightly explodes the common description of this passage as an “indictment” or “concrete attack” on Jews, or as an attempted “demonstration” that Jews in general are as much under the power of sin

as Gentiles.⁷⁵

In order to understand what Paul's target *was*, Stowers insisted we must understand how diatribal technique functioned in moral or instructional address. He rightly identifies different diatribal techniques:

1. the use of *objections*, indicated for example by expressions like *ph ēsi* ("he says") or *tis erei* ("someone will say") or *sy ereis* ("you will say");
2. rhetorical questions, imperatives, or accusations intended to convict the fictitious interlocutor of wrong thinking or hypocrisy (*elenchos*-rhetoric), sometimes indicated by a negative term of address like *mataie* ("O you misguided person") or *infelix* ("you unhappy person");
3. rhetorical questions leading to *false conclusions*, often indicated by an invitation to consider consequences: for example *ti oun* ("what then?"), *kai ti* ("and so, what?"), or the particle *ouk . . .* ("not [this, surely?]").

All of these forms are clearly evident in Romans. Just here, however, some categorical confusion distorts Stowers's reading of diatribal elements in the letter. Unfortunately, Stowers does not carefully maintain the distinctions between diatribal techniques that he has identified. The result is a confused reading of the diatribal address in Romans 2–3 that fundamentally misunderstands Paul's purpose in this section and in the letter as a whole.

Stowers reads Rom. 2:17-24 as a series of "indicting rhetorical questions." The picture the apostle paints, according to Stowers, is

not just of the pretentious person but of the pretentious moral and religious leader and teacher. The "Jew" here pretends to have a special relationship with God. He boasts . . . of his relation to God. . . . Bragging about what does not truly possess is the chief mark of the pretentious person. He also boasts in the law while breaking it. This person pretends to have great ethical knowlege, knowledge of the law and of God's will. Finally, he pretends to be a teacher and moral guide to others, although he does not embody what he teaches.⁷⁶

But (against Stowers) the person Paul addresses is *not* "bragging about what [he] does not truly possess." To the contrary, Paul is clear that the Judean *does* possess these things (see Rom. 9:4-5).⁷⁷ Neither do we hear Paul's Judean interlocutor admit that he has broken the law;

indeed, Paul has so structured the dialogue at this point that he has no opportunity to respond. Stowers insists (and I agree) that the apostrophe is not meant as Paul's characterization of Jews as such. But to the question, just what is Paul's purpose, then? Stowers has given different answers: either Paul is simply showing off, providing the Roman church a sample of his rhetorical skill by showing the sort of diatribal technique of which he is capable;⁷⁸ or else he is hurling a long-distance invective at perceived Judean opponents in Jerusalem.⁷⁹

These judgments fail to follow through with Stowers's own insights into the function of diatribe. The use of speech-in-character and of rhetorical questions to a fictitious interlocutor was normally "didactic," Stowers observed:

in using the methods of indictment and protreptic the teacher employs objections directed toward the various types of students, would-be students, auditors, and philosophers who characteristically make up his audience and for whom the style has been shaped.

Here Stowers came close to recognizing the function of this specific apostrophe:

all of the apostrophes in Romans indict pretentious and arrogant persons. Rather than indicating a polemic against the Jew, the apostrophes in Romans censure Jews, Gentiles, and Gentile Christians alike. None are excluded from the censure of the pretentious.⁸⁰

These conclusions follow naturally from Stowers's discussion of the normal didactic or hortatory effect of diatribal techniques. Indeed, Stowers concludes from Rom. 15:14-16 that "what Paul plans to do in Rome he is already doing in this letter, i.e., *euangelisasthai*."⁸¹ But Stowers does not follow through to the logical conclusion of these observations: namely, that the apostrophe to "the Jew" in 2:17-24 is in some way a device aimed at criticizing attitudes *among Paul's non-Judean audience* in a fundamentally hortatory letter.

We gain a clearer understanding of the apostrophe in 2:17-24 if we apply *to Romans* Stowers's description of how *leading questions* functioned in diatribal rhetoric. The contrast with 2:1-6 bears notice. There, Paul levels an accusation against a hypothetical interlocutor, using indicative statements:

Therefore you are without excuse, O mortal, everyone who judges, for in that by which you judge another you condemn yourself, *for*

you who judge do the same things.

Here, in contrast, Paul asks his hypothetical *Judean* interlocutor a series of questions:

. . . Do you not teach yourself? . . . Do you steal? . . . Do you commit adultery? . . . Do you rob temples? . . . By transgressing the law, do you dishonor God?

But he does not wait for an answer, and so cannot deliver a guilty verdict comparable to 2:1.⁸²

The apostrophe here remains *conditional*: *if* you steal, commit adultery, and rob temples, *then* you dishonor God; *then*, the verdict of scripture would apply: “the name of God is blasphemed among the nations because of you!” (2:24). *Then* your circumcision would avail you nothing (2:25). The apostrophe imaginatively embodies the assertion Paul has already made in 2:12-13: “as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law.”

It would be hard to imagine a self-respecting Judean arguing *against* Paul here: which of his contemporaries would have protested that being a Judean in fact gave one a license to sin? But Paul’s Judean contemporaries are not his target. The non-Judeans in Rome are. It is *they* who need to hear that Judeans do not, in fact, presume on God’s grace and mercy to indulge their sins.

Diatribes in the Judean’s response (3:1-9)

That is just what the audience hears when Paul’s Judean interlocutor at last gets a chance to talk back, in 3:1-9. Here again, Stowers’s insights into diatribe style are keys to interpretation; here again, however, Stowers has failed to follow through with these insights. He showed that in general, teachers employing diatribal style would use leading questions and false conclusions to move their fictitious hearer to the right conclusion. Puzzlingly, however, in his 1981 study Stowers read the rhetorical questions in 3:1, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 9 not as Paul’s leading questions but as *objections* from the Jewish interlocutor. (In 1994 he modified this outline, but continued to read 3:1 and 3:9 as objections.) This way of construing the dialogue puts “the Jew” on the defensive, recoiling from Paul’s earlier questions in 2:17-24. His supposed protest, “then what advantage does the Jew have?” implies that he had previously assumed that his “advantage” was precisely the license to get away with theft, adultery, and the robbing of temples. But this is scarcely credible *even as a fictitious dialogue*. To the contrary: as I argued in *The Rhetoric of Romans* (1990), on the basis of Stowers’s own discussion of diatribal technique, we should read

the questions in 3:1-9 not as objections from the interlocutor but as *Paul's* leading questions, and the answers as his dialogue partner's appropriate drawing of right conclusions and rejection of wrong conclusions.⁸³

The conversation thus runs as follows:

- | | | |
|--------|--------------------------------|---|
| 3:1 | Paul's leading question | Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? |
| 3:2 | <i>Interlocutor's response</i> | Much in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. |
| 3:3 | <i>Paul</i> | What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? |
| 3:4 | <i>Interlocutor</i> | By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true . . . |
| 3:5 | <i>Paul</i> | But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) |
| 3:6 | <i>Interlocutor</i> | By no means! For then how could God judge the world? |
| 3:7, 8 | <i>Paul</i> | But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), "Let us do evil so that good may come"? |
| | <i>Interlocutor</i> | Their condemnation is deserved! |
| 3:9a | <i>Paul</i> | What then? Do we have any defense (against God's judgment)? |
| 3:9b | <i>Interlocutor</i> | No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin. . . . |

This way of reading the diatribe more naturally conforms to Stowers's insights about the way teachers could use leading questions in fictitious dialogues to shape the perceptions and attitudes of their audiences. But it fundamentally changes our perception of Paul's purpose. He is not *indicting* a Judean who recoils in self-protection and protest; rather he is *enlisting* a Judean colleague who heartily endorses his conclusion. *Yes*, says his witness, *if* I have committed the sins you describe, I most assuredly deserve judgment! To expect otherwise would be to dishonor

God—and to justify the reprehensible allegations raised against my people by the nations, that we imagine we may “do evil that good may come.” Far better for me to be judged than for God’s honor to be impugned!

The Judean interlocutor is not concerned to protect his privilege over against God’s claim; to the contrary, he enthusiastically agrees with Paul that Judeans enjoy no defense against God’s judgment. The question in 3:9 has often been read as a repetition of 3:1, the unusual Greek form *proechometha?* taken either as an active middle (“are we any better off?” NRSV) or a passive (“are we at a disadvantage?” NRSV note). But the verb is a genuine middle, meaning “raise a defense for oneself” or “put up a defense.” When the Judean is asked whether he shares the presumption of being exempt from God’s judgment (2:1-6), he immediately gives an exemplary response: “Not at all!”⁸⁴

The non-Judean audience overhearing this conversation is meant to learn an important lesson *about Judeans*. Regardless of the emperor’s claims to magnanimity; regardless of the more scurrilous generalizations to be heard in the Roman street about the returning exiles as unworthy beneficiaries of Nero’s clemency; regardless of the offense given by the displaced and probably disreputable individuals asking for help in the city parks and streets; regardless of the quasi-official view that their people were in decline, broken and destined to be subjugated, present circumstances in Rome had little to do with genuine mercy or with the justice of God.

Here again we are in touch with the character of Paul’s argumentation as the dissociation of concepts.⁸⁵ The fundamental dissociation toward which Paul’s rhetoric drives is the distinction of the present from the future, or more precisely, the dissociation of the present *as the failed realization of God’s purposes in history* from the future *as the complete realization of those purposes*. The full revelation of God’s justice is yet to come. That will be a day of judgment: of glory and honor for those who have endured in doing right, but wrath and punishment for all who have done evil (2:6-11). In place of the present regime of arrogance and pretension, corruption and contempt for the truth, *that day* will bring a universal and inescapable judgment according to works. Until now, the world has seen spectacular examples of God’s wrath being revealed (1:18-32); but until now, history has more usually been the arena of God’s forbearance of sins (3:25). God’s kindness and mercy have provided a temporary reprieve, allowing time to repent; but that time is drawing quickly to an end.

To read the present disposition of power and privilege as the climax of history would be a grave mistake. To join in the delusion that the exercise of imperial prerogative constitutes

genuine mercy, and that justice means no more than brokering favor regardless of desert, would be morally disastrous.

The Manifestation of Mercy in History

Paul's stylized conversation with "a Judean" in chapters 2–3 thus anticipates the argument of chapters 9–11. There, too, the relation of God's mercy to the present moment in history is at the theological heart of the issue. Understanding divine mercy aright is necessary to discerning the will of God, "the good and acceptable and perfect," but given imperial realities, it also sets one inevitably at odds with the mentality of the present age (12:1-2).

But Paul's chief concern in chapters 9–11 is not to diagnose the inadequacy in Israel's thinking. His more urgent objective is to guide his non-Judean audience to a correct perception on Israel's present circumstances. God has been found by those who did not seek God, the nations (10:20, quoting Isa. 65:1), but God has also stretched out his hands to an untrusting people, Israel (10:21, quoting Isa. 65:2). This is—again—not a final determination of "who is in and who is out," but a description of God's persistent efforts to bring *both* Israel and the nations to salvation (the *de* in 10:21 is conjunctive, not adversative). God has not abandoned his people (11:1).

The dissociative logic in these chapters is coherent and powerful. Present circumstances are only a guide to the future if one knows the deep logic, the "mystery," which Paul reveals. Without it, the non-Judeans in Rome are able only to draw the conclusions to which the cold logic of imperial ideology leads them: those who appear in the streets as the victi of imperial power, the losers of history's proud march, are in fact God-forsaken. That conclusion, Paul warns, is a fatal mistake for it attributes to the empire the power to determine the future, and that power is God's alone.

The mercy of God must be construed aright. Nero's court claimed that the humble circumstances of Judeans in the streets of Rome were as much as the wretched of the earth could hope to receive from imperial mercy, and far more than they deserved. Against that claim, Paul contemplates a dramatic reversal that constitutes a repudiation of imperial logic. History's course has *not* reached its climax in the mercy of the emperor. Rather those who now *appear* to be "enemies," *persona non grata* in the imperial dispensation, in fact suffer their present ignominy "for your sake." In reality, they are the elect, beloved "for the sake of the ancestors" (11:28).

This is the “mystery” Paul reveals to the Roman *ekklēsia*. History has not yet run its course. Rather (he tells his audience) we stand at the very brink of the fulfillment of God’s purposes. It is *God* who has brought upon Israel a temporary “hardening, in order to achieve a broader redemption than anyone could anticipate, when God will have mercy on all. Until that moment, it is *God* who has “imprisoned all in disobedience” (11:31-32), just as it is God who has subjected the world to futility and corruption (8:20-21). It is an imperial boast—not a Judean one—that provokes the apostle’s rebuttal.

Notes

¹. This essay is drawn from chapters 1 and 3 of *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*, to be published by Fortress Press in 2008. Copyright © 2007 Neil Elliott. Made available for scholarly purposes; further distribution only by permission of the author and publisher.

². Essential works include P. A. Brunt, *Roman Imperial Themes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990); Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988); and S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); all of these are excerpted in R. A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997).

³. Fredric Jameson, “On Interpretation,” pp. 17-102 in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), esp. 52-53.

⁴. Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 67.

⁵. *Ibid.*; the rhetorical question is a quotation from J. Béranger, *Principatus* (Geneva: Droz, 1975), 166.

⁶. See Gerhard E. Lenski’s extended discussion of agrarian empires in *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), chaps. 8 and 9. Roland Boer argues for shifting analysis away from Marx’s category of “mode of production” to the more flexible concept of “regimes of allocation,” distinguishing tribute, “war machine,” corvée labor, slavery, and patron-client regimes of allocation, and identifying the last two especially with the Roman world (*Marxist Criticism of the Bible* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003], 244-45). G. E. M. de Ste. Croix observes that while slavery was an indispensable component of the Roman economy, it was only one form of unfree labor. The Roman economy depended on both the ownership of land and the control of unfree labor: “it was these assets above all which enabled the propertied class to exploit the rest of the

population” (*Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980], 33; 133-34); Garnsey and Saller offer a very similar assessment (*The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987], chaps. 3–5).

7. De Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 409.

8. Ibid., 409-11. V. Nutton remarks that by emphasizing the “concord” enjoyed by all in their cities, provincial elites could “announce to the governor and the emperor that police action [was] unnecessary” (“The Beneficial Ideology,” in *Imperialism in the Ancient World*, ed. Peter Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978], 212; see also M. H. Crawford, “Greek Intellectuals and the Roman Aristocracy,” in *ibid.*, 193-207.

9. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 5.

10. Historian P. A. Brunt makes the point when he observes that Cicero’s “own personal opinions can only be properly elicited from his intimate letters,” when he had no particular reason to “veil or distort his real views” (“*Laus Imperii*,” in *Roman Imperial Themes*, pp. 288-9).

11. Ibid., 28.

12. See *Jewish Antiquities* 18:9, Tessa Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora from Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), pp. 346-51.

13. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2:348-9. Josephus explains that since the stubbornness of the rebels “is universally known and evident, I shall refrain from reporting it in greater detail” (*Ant.* 18:23-25). On the anti-Roman cause, see Martin Hengel, *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 A.D.*, trans. David Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980), and Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987). I have tried to reconstruct aspects of the anti-Roman position from the attitudes that Josephus caricatures (in *Jewish War*, 3:348-401) and to compare the results with the “philosophy” of the anonymous author of 4 Maccabees (Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul* [Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994; Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2006], 149-67).

14. De Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle*, pp. 352-3. Michael Parenti provides a vivid history of the brutal class warfare inflicted by the self-styled “best men” of republican Rome, the *optimates*, who used private armies to slaughter thousands and thus to destroy popular movements for even modest democracy and land reform. He notes that the three largest slave rebellions, occurring in the last two centuries of the Republic, “reached the level of open

warfare. . . . All were mercilessly crushed. There were numerous other slave uprisings but they were small-scale, short-lived, and unsuccessful. . . .” Even among slaves who held back from rising up, Parenti suggests we can safely assume the same level of “hidden ‘ingratitude’” that so inflamed former slaveholders in the South following the U.S. Civil War: *The Assassination of Julius Caesar*, 38; 42; 59-83.

15. Parenti (*The Assassination of Julius Caesar*, 117-18) quotes Plutarch, *Caesar* 6:1-4: “it was incredible how numerous” the supporters of a slain popular leader, Marius, proved to be, “and what a multitude of them appeared came shouting into the Capitol,” on the subsequent occasion of his widow’s death.

16. Scott, *Domination*, pp. 36-7; 136; 150-151, 14. On the Roman “mob” see De Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle*, pp. 357, 361.

17. On graffiti as an important source for non-elite perceptions, see Justin J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty, and Survival*; *Studies of the New Testament and Its World* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998); Parenti, *Assassination of Julius Caesar*. Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 91, discusses anonymous expressions of disdain for the emperor.

18. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 136-52; 20-22; Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty, and Survival*, 34-35. The movement surrounding the populist land reformer Tiberius Gracchus relied on mass action and graffiti alike. see Plutarch, *Tiberius Gracchus* 21:2-3; Parenti, *The Assassination of Julius Caesar*, p. 217.

19. Scott, *Domination*, chap. 6.

20. In graffiti, Romans scorned the pretension that the emperor bore Apollo’s image, comparing him instead to an official enemy:

Though Nero may pluck the chords of a lyre
And the Parthian King the string of a bow,
He who chants to the lyre with heavenly fire
Is Apollo as much as his far-darting foe.

Graffiti accused the arrogant emperor of provoking the rebels in Gaul –

Nero’s crowing has awakened the *galli* --

using a Latin pun meaning both “roosters” and “Gauls.” After 59 they accused Nero of murdering his mother:

Aeneas the Trojan hero
Carried off his aged father;
His remote descendant Nero
Likewise carried off his mother;
Heroes worthy of each other.

These are Robert Graves's translations of Suetonius, *Nero* 39 (*The Twelve Caesars*, ed. Michael Grant [New York: Penguin, 1957], 236-37). Champlin discusses these and other anonymous messages ("pasquinades"): *Nero*, 91-92.

21. See Champlin, *Nero*, chap. 4.

22. Scott, *Domination*, 14.

23. Philo, *On Dreams*, 2.92 (emphasis added). On the significance of this passage for an appropriate understanding of Philo's politics, see E. R. Goodenough, *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 55-62; on its relevance for an adequate understanding of rhetoric in the Roman period, see my essay, "Romans 13:1-7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda," in *Paul and Empire* (ed. Horsley), 196-204; on these texts as examples of "hidden transcripts," see my essays, "The 'Patience of the Jews': Strategies of Resistance and Accommodation to Imperial Cultures," in *Pauline Conversations in Context: Essays in Honor of Calvin J. Roetzel*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson, Philip Sellew, and Claudia Setzer, JSNTSup 221 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 32-42, and "Strategies of Resistance and Hidden Transcripts in the Pauline Communities," in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance*, ed. Richard Horsley (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 97-122.. Scott's term for what Philo calls "caution" (*eulabeia*) is "tactical prudence" (*Domination*, 15).

24. *PssSol* 1:4-8; 2:1-2; 1QpHab, *passim*; Philo, *On Dreams* 2.89-90 (Abraham and the sons of Cheth), 2.78-80 (on Joseph as a figure of the tyrant). For a fuller discussion of these texts in terms of Scott's "hidden transcripts," see Elliott, "The 'Patience of the Jews'" (art. cit.). The political approach to Philo's allegorical biblical interpretation owes much to E. R. Goodenough, *The Politics of Philo Judaeus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938); see also Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 183-5.

25. *Special Laws* 3:159-62. On the regular coercion of the tax gatherers see MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, pp. 36-37; from Palestine we hear protests that "before the grain-tax is delivered, the poll-tax is due" and that "the cities are set up by the state in order . . . to extort and oppress" (*ibid.*, p. 34, and references there).

26. For example, the Apocalypse to John or *4 Ezra* (*2 Esdras*), where Rome is represented as an eagle that has "held sway over the world with great terror, and over all the earth with grievous oppression" (*4 Ezra* 11:37-46); see Wengst, *Pax Romana*, 53-54.

27. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, "Reconstructing 'Resistance' or Reading to Resist: James C. Scott and the Politics of Interpretation," in Horsley, ed., *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance*, 145-55.

28. Champlin, *Nero*, 94.

29. *De clementia*, 1.1.1-2; 1.3.5–1.4.3.

30. Champlin, *Nero*, 63.

31. Champlin, *Nero*, 63-64, quoting Cicero, *Pro Sestio* 106. Champlin means by his extended discussion of this political aspect of the games (63-68) to demonstrate that Nero was in earnest as a performer; his discussion also demonstrates that the very theatricality of the games ensured that the central message conveyed by the medium was that of the emperor's attentiveness to "his" people. Similarly Miriam Griffin observes that "with the end of free political activity, only the games were left as a regular place where popular enthusiasms and grievances could be aired without counting as civic disorder," and that the games functioned to allow the emperor a public venue for displaying his civic virtues (*Nero*, 110-11).

32. *Ibid.*, 66-67; on the relation between ostentatious benefactions (the games, the corn dole) and popularity, see Griffin, *Nero*, 104-12. On the heavily scripted theatricality of the "conversation" between emperor and people at the games, I note Scott's suggestion that the greater the pressure exerted by a disparity in power, the more ritualized the public discourse will be (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 3).

33. Champlin, *Nero*, 95.

34. *Ibid.*, 96; 103.

35. On the oral performance of ancient letters, see Joanna Dewey, "Textuality in an Oral Culture: A Survey of the Pauline Traditions," *Semeia* 65 (1994) 37-65; Antoinette Clark Wire, "Performance, Politics, and Power: A Response," *ibid.*, 129.

36. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 29-33.

37. Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*; 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), xl–xlii.

38. N. T. Wright notes that imperial themes were "almost entirely screened out" in the work of the Pauline Theology Section of the SBL through the 1980s and early 1990s: "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in *Paul and Politics: Ekklēsia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*, ed. R. A. Horsley (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 2000), 162.

³⁹ Jewett, *Romans*, 250-51.

40. Slavoj Žižek describes the "logic of victimization" in Western journalism, represented in a *New York Times* article in which the subject to be protected by NATO intervention was "identified from the outset as a

powerless victim of circumstances, deprived of all political identity, reduced to stark suffering,” “beyond any political recrimination.” Here Žižek finds “the ideological construction of the ideal subject-victim in aid of whom NATO intervenes: not a political subject with a clear agenda, but a subject of helpless suffering . . . caught up in the madness of a local clash that can be pacified only by the intervention of a benevolent foreign power . . .” (“Victims, Victims Everywhere,” in *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* [New York: Verso, 2000], 54-63).

41. Gilbert Achcar, *The Clash of Barbarisms: The Making of a New World Disorder*, expanded and updated ed. (London: Paradigm, 2006), 23; 65.

42. Cicero, *De republica* 3.15; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.851-3.

43. Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 82-85.

44. For contemporary analogies, alongside the delineation of America’s vocation to bring democracy to the world in “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America” (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2002), we may set the president’s repeated statements that no people on earth could object to the United States’ pursuit of its own interests unless it is because “they hate our freedoms.” But against these we might also set Achcar’s insightful critique in *The Clash of Barbarisms*. The saturation of U.S. media with “iconic pictures”—scenes of grateful Iraqi crowds welcoming U.S. troops and cheering as statues of Saddam Hussein were toppled—was occasionally criticized even before “postwar” demonstrations by “ungrateful” Iraqis began.

45. Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, 82-85.

46. Tacitus, *Annals* 12.12-13.

47. Suetonius, *Nero* 10; Tacitus, *Annals* 13.4.

48. *De clementia* 1.1.1-2; 1.4.2; 1.1.6; 1.11.3.

49. *Ibid.*, 1.2.1-2; 1.4.2; 1.12.4; 2.2.2; see Griffin, *Nero*, 104.

50. According to Josephus, Claudius recognized that “from earliest times” Judeans had enjoyed “equal civic rights” (*is ēs politeias*) with Alexandrians (*Ant.* 19.278). Schäfer attributes the favorable or ambiguous aspects of Josephus’s version of the decree to his “wishful thinking”; the more likely authentic version is that in *CPJ* (see the next note): *Judeophobia*, 137-38.

51. Text and discussion in A. Fuks, V. Tcherikover, and M. Stern, eds., *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957–64), 2:36-55.

52. Schäfer observes the one-sidedness of the decree: *Judeophobia*, 147-51.
53. Greg Woolf, "Becoming Roman, Staying Greek: Culture, Identity, and the Civilizing Process in the Roman East," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 40 (1994) 116-43; "Beyond Romans and Nativdes," *World Archaeology* 28:3 (1995) 339-50.
54. Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 67.
55. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*, pp. 45-6.
56. Schäfer emphasizes that the conflict was "first and foremost a political drama in the triangle of Flaccus, Gaius Caligula, and the Alexandrians. The Jews are the innocent victims of a political conflict of interests" (*Judeophobia*, 143).
57. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.3, 5; see Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, III.1: 75-76.
58. Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, 159-61.
59. Leonard Victor Rutgers, "Roman Policy toward the Jews: Expulsions from the City of Rome during the First Century C.E.," in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 93-116, esp. 98-105.
60. Rutgers, "Roman Policy toward the Jews," 104-8. On this point Rutgers offers an important corrective to Slingerland's study, which emphasizes antipathy toward non-Roman religion as the primary motive of Roman policy toward the Jews.
61. Jewett speaks of a consensus that Romans is an occasional letter, and relies on the date of the edict of Claudius for establishing the date of the letter (*Hermeneia* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007], 3, 18-20).
62. Wolfgang Wiefel, "'The Jewish Community in Ancient Rome and the Origins of Roman Christianity,'" pp. 85-101 in *The Romans Debate*, rev. and exp. ed. (ed. Karl P. Donfried; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), esp. 96-101. On Judean beggars in public: Martial, *Epigram* 10.57.13; Juvenal, *Satire* 2.11; 6.541-44. On diet, see Juvenal's third *Satire* which ridicules the figure of a Judean beggar who subsists on beans, leeks, vinegar, and boiled leather. Josephus tells of priests from Judea who, while awaiting a hearing with Nero in Rome, could maintain their diet only by subsisting on figs and nuts (*Life* 3). Hans-Werner Bartsch attributes the conflict between "weak" and "strong" over diet (Romans 14-15) to these circumstances: "Die antisemitischen Gegner des Paulus im Römerbrief," in *Antijudaismus im Neuen Testament?* ed. W. Eckert and other (Munich: Kaiser, 1967); idem, "Die historische Situation des Römerbriefes," *SE 4/TU* 102 (1968) 282-91.

63. Horace, *Sermones* 1.9.

64. Seneca, in a lost treatise, *De superstitione*, as quoted by Augustine, *City of God*, 6.10.

65. Suetonius, *Nero* 10.

66. *Ibid.*, 1.2.1-2; 1.4.2; 1.12.4; 2.2.2; see Griffin, *Nero*, 104.

67. On the hortatory thrust of this section see Neil Elliott, *The Rhetoric of Romans* (Sheffield, Eng. : JSOT Press, 1990), 146-52.

68. *Ibid.*, 225-33.

69. Bultmann on “characteristic Jewish boast”; Käsemann on “demolition of Jewish privilege.”

70. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul, the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 80 (emphasis added); so also Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

71. The strategic insertion of a comma in 3:19 in the Nestle-Aland²⁷ and the NRSV produces three clauses:

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------|---|
| (1) | <i>hosa ho nomos legei</i> | whatever the law says, |
| (2) | <i>tois en tô nomô lalei,</i> | it speaks to those who are under the law, |
| (3) | <i>hina pan stoma phrag ē</i> | so that every mouth may be silenced, |
| | <i>kai hypodikos gen ētai</i> | and the whole world |
| | <i>pas ho kosmos tô theô.</i> | may be held accountable to God. |

Removing the comma (after *lalei*) allows a more natural balance of phrases and changes the sense of the sentence dramatically:

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| | <i>hosa ho nomos legei tois en tô nomô</i> | whatever the law says to those who are in the law |
| (2) | <i>lalei hina pan stoma phrag ē</i> | it speaks so that every mouth may be silenced |
| | <i>kai hypodikos gen ētai pas ho kosmos</i> | and the whole world may be held accountable |
| | <i>tô theô.</i> | to God. |

See Elliott, *The Rhetoric of Romans*, 142-46. [AQ: Neil, check layout of the above]

72. I discuss this passage in greater detail in Elliott, *The Rhetoric of Romans*, 127-57.

73. Stanley K. Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, SBLDS 57 (Chico: Scholars, 1981), 110-12; so again in *A Rereading of Romans: Gentiles, Jews, Justice* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994], 153.

74. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, 143-44.

75. A few of the scholars who read 2:17-29 as an indictment or critique of Jews in general concede that as such it is empirically false, “not convincing,” “internally inconsistent,” and relies on the “exceptional” case and on “gross exaggeration.” See my more extended discussion of the rhetorical inadequacy of this reading in *The Rhetoric of Romans*, 191-204.

76. Stowers, *Diatribes and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 96; 112-13.

77. Elliott, *The Rhetoric of Romans*, 130-31.

78. In the letter Paul presents himself to the Romans as a teacher. . . . Paul uses the style of indictment and proreptic and presents himself to the Roman Christians not as a spiritual father and guide, but as a ‘philosophical’ or religious-ethical teacher. . . . [The letter] is the self-introduction of Paul as a teacher and preacher of the gospel. The body of Romans is written in the style *he would use in teaching a group of Christians.*” *Diatribes and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 179-180, 182 (emphasis added). Similarly in his 1994 work, Stowers writes that “Romans allows gentile believers to overhear a discussion in which Paul argues for gentile justification through Christ against a Jew who opposes righteousness for gentiles apart from works of the law. In this way he can dramatically argue both for his own gospel and against its most threatening alternative” (*A Rereading of Romans*, 168).

79. In his 1994 work, Stowers identified the questions in 2:17-24 more precisely as “a polemical construction of ‘missionary’ opponents. This Jew is one of Paul’s competitors for gentiles.” Indeed, Stowers divines from the passage that the Jew against which Paul inveighs represents “Jewish teachers [who] think that they can make gentiles righteous before God by teaching them to observe certain works from the law. . . . Paul’s approach was utterly different” (*A Rereading of Romans*, 150-51).

80. *Ibid.*, 152; 176-7.

81. *Ibid.*, 182.

82. The point is obscured, unfortunately, in the Nestle-Aland²⁷ Greek text, which ends all these phrases with a question mark except the last, which it ends with a semicolon. (The RSV and NRSV insert a question mark.) The earliest surviving manuscript of Romans to include punctuation marks, Codex Sinaiticus, has a question mark at the end of 2:23; see my *The Rhetoric of Romans*, 128-29.

83. A table may help to represent the different ways of reading the diatribe here (adapted from Stowers, *Diatribes and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 119-20; Elliott, *The Rhetoric of Romans*, 132-41; and Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, 165-66):

Stowers 1981 Elliott 1990 (and now) Stowers 1994

3:1 Objection (from the Jewish interlocutor) Paul’s leading question Objection (from the Jewish interlocutor) 3:2 Paul’s answer Interlocutor’s answer Paul’s answer 3:3 Objection Paul’s leading question Paul’s leading

question3:4Paul's rejection of a false conclusionInterlocutor's rejection of a false conclusionInterlocutor's rejection of a false conclusion3:5Objection (or rhetorical question)Paul's leading questionPaul's leading question3:6Paul's rejection of a false conclusionInterlocutor's rejection of a false conclusionInterlocutor's rejection of a false conclusion3:7ObjectionPaul's leading questionPaul's leading question3:8ObjectionPaul's leading question and interlocutor's answer (a true conclusion)Paul's leading question and answer of his own question3:9Paul's rejection of a false conclusionPaul's question and interlocutor's rejection of a false conclusionInterlocutor's question and Paul's rejection of a false conclusion

84. On the middle translation of *proechometha* see Nils Dahl, "Romans 3:9: Text and Meaning," in *Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honour of C. K. Barrett*, ed. M. D. Hooker and S. G. Wilson (London: SPCK, 1982), 184-204, here at 194; J. C. O'Neill, *Romans* (London: Penguin, 1975), 68; and Elliott, *The Rhetoric of Romans*, 132-33, 141.

85. Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 411-50.