

Switchback Codes

Paul, Apocalyptic, and the Art of Resistance

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When the great lord passes the wise
peasant bows deeply and silently farts.

Ethiopian proverb

You'll bring me to speak the unspeakable,
very soon.

Sophocles, Antigone

This paper begins with a simple question: why does Paul use apocalyptic language when addressing his non-Jewish audiences? In fact, what happens if we move chronologically through the authentic letters of Paul to see how and why Paul uses apocalyptic tropes? In a previous paper for the Christianity Seminar,¹ I had emphasized Paul's self-understanding as a Jewish prophet to the nations while juxtaposing his prophetic voice with that of the Roman poet Horace. Upon reflection it became clear to me that, while Paul was self-consciously a Jewish prophet, his use of what would be called apocalyptic language seems to complicate the picture. Indeed, it would appear that Paul employs an apocalyptic vocabulary in his prophetic stance. While this usage might play out satisfactorily within a Jewish environment, it was not clear to me why such a combination of linguistic strategies would be employed for a non-Jewish situation. Paul does not simply display his linguistic repertoire in a new situation. Paul is too cagey a rhetorician to speak without strategic effect. What signals, then, is he sending to his audience?

There is also a lingering assumption on the part of modern readers of Paul. While it was important to compare the poetic propaganda of Horace with the prophetic voice of Paul, one cannot let that comparison stand as if these prophetic voices were equally weighted in the first century. Modern readers of Paul (and for that matter, readers of Paul from the late second century and especially from the fourth century onward) read his letters as a literature of the winners. As part of the NT, the letters of Paul have become the public transcript of an accepted regime. But such an assumption is grossly anachronistic. If we were to read these letters in their probable political and social context, could we

1. Dewey, "Per Omnia Saecula Saeculorum: Worlds Colliding and Created."

ever think that they were designed for general public consumption? In fact, the long-standing critical consensus is that such letters were delivered to minority communities, some of which eventually became suspect to authoritarian ears. In other words, while the songs of Horace were “command performances,” bolstering and sustaining the imperial utopian claims, the letters of Paul were witnesses of alternative voices, contradicting and playing against the imperial default. Are the letters of Paul, in fact, letters of resistance to the dominant voice of the first century?

James Scott² has led the way in investigating how to detect and understand the power relations between the dominant and the powerless. He distinguishes between the public transcript overseen and reinforced by the powerful through a variety of means (buildings, parades, celebrations, songs, etc.) and the hidden transcript of the overlooked. Within the confines of the dominated, space is still carved out for experiments of freedom and the rehearsal of dreams. Rebellion against the prevailing regime comes out in murmuring, jokes, and sometimes full-blown critiques. Scott’s work alerts the critical reader of the letters of Paul to the possibility of re-reading this material within the acoustical system of the socially hidden ones.

We shall apply Scott’s insights to four locations in Paul’s letters. We shall begin with Paul’s description of his originating insight (Gal 1:12–16) to note the suggestive mixture of apocalyptic and prophetic language. Then we shall turn to 1 Thessalonians to re-examine how apocalyptic tropes mingle with prophetic speech as well as recognizing the significant level of reciprocal conversation. 2 Corinthians 5:16–21 will provide us with telling evidence of revolutionary speech, while Romans 8 will demonstrate how the apocalyptic vision of Paul becomes further revised and even more pointed against the dominating vision of Rome.

A Breakthrough that Changes Everything

Gal 1:12–16: I say this because it was not transmitted to me by anyone nor did anyone teach it to me. Rather, it came to me as an insight from God about Jesus as God’s Anointed. ¹³Surely you’ve heard of my own behavior as a practicing Jew, how aggressively I harassed God’s new community, trying to wipe it out. ¹⁴I went way beyond most of my contemporaries in my observance of Judaism, and became notably zealous about my ancestral traditions. ¹⁵However, when the One, who designated me before I was born and commissioned me to be an envoy, surprising all human expectations, chose to make his son ¹⁶known through me with the intent that I would proclaim God’s world-transforming news to the nations.

2. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*.

In making his case before his Galatian communities, Paul underscores that he does not rely on the established methods of authority (Gal 1:12a). He did not receive his message from anyone nor was he taught it; instead he received his understanding of Jesus as “God’s Anointed” *apo apokalypseos* (“as an insight”). Paul uses apocalyptic language to distinguish his message from the other missionaries who had visited Galatia after he left. It should be pointed out that Paul is not actually claiming privilege; rather, in using the word *apokalypsis* he is indicating that the usual ways of understanding the situation (where privilege was significant) had been changed. In fact, we can begin to detect the stress Paul is making to the Galatians. In bringing this word into the conversation Paul declares that a fundamental breakthrough has occurred and that this breakthrough changes the way things are perceived. This point is sustained when we see that he characterized his life into two periods: up to the breakthrough and after the breakthrough (vv. 13–14 and vv. 15–16). In vv. 13–14 Paul describes his behavior as a religious competitor who considers that the world works on having an advantage over others under the divine gaze. From the time he has his insight, Paul discovers that the “one with no advantage”—Jesus the crucified—had been surprisingly accepted by God. The world of Paul was turned upside down. A dramatic change has occurred. There is no longer the need or demand for established continuity (tradition).

Furthermore, in speaking of his experience, Paul describes it in prophetic terms (“when the One, who designated me before I was born and commissioned me to be an envoy”). Yet God delivered a breakthrough insight (*apokalypsai*) for the new prophet to proclaim to the nations. In fact, Paul describes this as an insight into the “son of God.” Not only do prophetic and apocalyptic language mix, but also the usual title of the Roman emperor has been given to the “nobody” Jesus. Already we have intimated in Paul’s description of his paradigm shift³ a counter to the dominant coinage of the day.

A Grassroots Transformation: 1 Thessalonians

1 Thess 1:5–10: Our world-transforming message did not come to you as mere rhetoric, but with the power and presence of God, and with unqualified conviction. You recognized accurately what kind of messengers we were when we

3. In the culture of the first century, change was not a positive. Instead, people hearkened back to the stereotype that continued to occur. Augustus, e.g., realized that he could not declare the Roman Republic gone; rather, he constructed the political fiction that the Senate and the Roman people still held sway and he was merely the “first citizen.” Moreover, he made sure that the propaganda placed him in the likeness of Aeneas, the ancient ancestor. Change or discontinuity was masked and muted in the image of a recurrent past. The successful future was a return to the “golden age,” the real meaning of *revolution*. Paul, as we shall see, by using apocalyptic tropes and images, underscores the positive and definitive reality of change.

were among you for your benefit. ⁶And so, you became imitators of us and of the lord when you accepted our message, though under great stress, with the joy of God's presence and power. ⁷Therefore, you have become, in turn, a model for all those in Macedonia and Greece who have put their confidence and trust in God. ⁸Indeed, you have made our message about the lord resound not only throughout Macedonia and Greece, but everywhere your trust in God is so widely known that we don't need to mention it. ⁹These reports about you demonstrate how effective our stay was among you: how you have turned away from lifeless images in order to serve the living and real God ¹⁰and to wait for God's "son" from heaven, whom God raised from among the dead, Jesus, who will rescue us from the condemnation that is sure to come.

Probably the earliest of the authentic letters of Paul, 1 Thessalonians, opens quickly with an image of incredible movement on the part of the Thessalonian community. Evidently the message Paul delivered did have a "world-transforming" effect (1:5). Such a message was a counter to the Roman *euaggelion*.⁴ Thus, we already are within the compass of a counter transcript. But the Thessalonians do not leave the message without genuine engagement. Their response has a considerable effect throughout parts of Greece beyond their particular circle (vv. 7–8). We can begin to imagine other "cells" of followers of the Anointed Jesus starting up in various parts of Greece. Moreover, this movement by the Thessalonians is remarkably non-hierarchical. Paul nowhere mentions any leaders of this drive. Instead we get the impression that this movement is an oral, grass roots initiative. Verses 9–10 place this motion within an apocalyptic scenario. The Thessalonians have not only "turned away from idols" (standard synagogal critique), but they await the arrival of "God's son from heaven" who will rescue them from the coming "condemnation." It would seem that Paul has couched his message of transformation within the apocalyptic language of the judgment of God and the coming (*parousia*) of "God's son." In using this apocalyptic scenario Paul reconstructs the understanding of the *parousia* of the one usually understood as "God's son" — the emperor. Justice, the utopian dream of Jewish apocalyptic, will arrive with "God's son." Moreover, the Thessalonians' turning away from idols is part of the final scenario. It was not a simple change in behavior but a radical re-identification with reality. Indeed, what had begun with God's acceptance of Jesus continues with the Thessalonians' response and movement and can be viewed not in terms of a recurrent past but rather from the perspective of a future that has already begun to break in.

Not only does 1 Thessalonians work as a counter transcript to the imperial script, but it also exhibits another remarkable aspect of this counter world. In this letter we have evidence of a space carved out for reciprocal conversation.

4. Scott, *The Real Paul*, 45ff.

This stands in contrast to the command performances before those who control the world.

1 Thess 2:7–12, 17–20: Although as envoys of God’s Anointed we could have thrown our weight around! But we treated you gently like a nanny caring for her children. ⁸We were so devoted to you that we were willing to share with you not only God’s message but our own lives as well—that is how much your friendship meant to us. ⁹For I’m sure you remember the stress and strain we endured as we worked night and day so as not to impose on anyone while we were sharing God’s message with you. ¹⁰You are eyewitnesses—and so is God—how we treated you who were persuaded by God’s message with respect, fairness, and integrity. ¹¹So you can’t deny that we cared for each one of you as if you were our own children, ¹²prodding, encouraging, and coaxing you to live in a manner pleasing to God, who summons you into his own kingdom and splendor. . . . ¹⁷Since we are separated from you a short time, in person but not in our hearts, we eagerly yearn to see you again face to face. ¹⁸Indeed, we tried to return to you—I, Paul, tried more than once—but our plans were frustrated. ¹⁹Who will be our pride and joy and crowning glory when we meet Jesus our lord face to face, if not you? ²⁰Yes, you are truly our pride and joy!

It has often been pointed out how Paul’s tone with the Thessalonians becomes quite personal and affectionate here. But we need to go beyond pointing out that various rhetorical tropes are being invoked (e.g., “we treated you gently like a nanny caring for her children”; 2:7). Such rhetoric and personal declarations (“that we were willing to share with you not only God’s message but our own lives as well”; 2:8) underscore the level of freedom of speech shared by the Thessalonians with Paul. That atmosphere of reciprocal speech would stand in marked contrast to the dominating speech patterns of the Roman city. Paul can feel free to declare his affection and his pride in their hoped-for future (vv. 12, 19). Again, the apocalyptic scenario structures and helps compose a community space that reaches across space (v. 17a) and time (v. 19). Instead of visions of Roman triumph we see that the future brings with it the presence of those “unknowns” of the Roman empire when the real “lord” shows up. People who would have been reminded to “keep their place” and to “respect those above” now are being reminded that they are already moving into a future that is “theirs.”

Paul’s advice to the Thessalonians in chapters 4–5 becomes much clearer when we see this letter as one side of a “hidden conversation.” Paul turns to an existential issue for the Thessalonians. Some of the members of the community evidently have died. The living members, having taken seriously Paul’s message embedded within an apocalyptic scenario, cannot imagine how those who have died can participate in the future liberation.

1 Thess 4:13–18: Concerning those who have died, we don’t want you to be uninformed: you shouldn’t mourn as do those without hope. ¹⁴Because if we believe

"Jesus died and arose," so also God will bring with Jesus all those belonging to him who have died.

¹⁵We can assure you of this by *these prophetic words from the lord*: we who are still alive when Jesus comes will not be given preference over those who have already died.

¹⁶The lord himself will descend from heaven with a loud summons, with an archangel's shout and with the trumpet of God, then those who have already died and belong to the Anointed will ascend first; ¹⁷then those of us who are still living will be caught up with them in the clouds to greet the lord in the air. And so we will be with the lord from then on.

¹⁸So you should encourage each other *with these prophetic words*.

As I noted in my previous paper, readers often miss that in this section of 1 Thessalonians we actually find evidence of Paul delivering oracular utterances.⁵ Yet these prophetic utterances are filled with apocalyptic imagery. They pick up the apocalyptic allusion in 1:10 and push the discussion forward into 5:1ff. In order to respond to the Thessalonians' concern, Paul inflects the oracular utterances with apocalyptic tropes. A mournful situation has been electrified by a stunning vision that shakes the community into a reconsideration of what the future can entail. Paul breaks the charm of what would be considered another of the controlling conditions of existence, indeed, the ultimate deterrent to human hope: the grave. This illustrates how the hidden transcript, the conversation between Paul and the Thessalonians, can turn into political dynamite.

To see how this is the case, we only need to consider the political message of the Gemma Augustea.⁶ Here the public address is quite clear. Rome has conquered and those who oppose her will suffer the consequences, as seen in the bottom section of the brooch. The Dacians, subjected by Tiberius (in the chariot on the top left), are to undergo further humiliation and possibly death. Augustus sits, the "Zeus Paternal" reigns, beside the goddess Roma in an atmosphere of divine serenity and peace. The Roman victors are already riding the heavens. In contrast, the oracles delivered by Paul undermine any concep-

5. In 4:14–16 we have a specific use of the word *hoti*. In English *hoti* is rendered as quotation marks: (that) "Jesus died and arose" (v. 14). Also in v. 15 *hoti* is read as quotation marks: "we who are still alive. . ." Again in v. 16 *hoti* is noted as quotation marks: "the lord himself will descend. . ." If *hoti* is used in 4:14 as quotation marks, then what follows *hoti* in vv. 15 and 16 would be quotations of some sort of utterance. Also note in v. 15 that the phrase "by the word of the lord" (just before *hoti*) is employed. In v. 18 Paul urges them to encourage each other "with these words." In 4:15b we would then have an oracular utterance addressing the concern of the Thessalonians. The text of 4:16–17 would follow actually as a second oracle in visionary form. In effect, Paul would be functioning as a prophet, delivering oracles through the letter's performance to the Thessalonian community. Dewey, "Per Omnia Saecula," 9.

6. "Gemma Augustea." By Dioscurides (?) - Self-photographed, October 2013 (James Steakley), CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=30890931>



The Gemma Augustea

tion of advantage. The dead, who in the eyes of the first century have lost any advantage, are not overlooked. In fact, the apocalyptic sound and light show gathers the dead along with the living in a dramatic reversal of social values and preferences. It is as if, in Paul's second oracle, the Dacians are lifted from their gloom and doom and placed on high. Such an oracle then would be a radical re-drawing of the usual public transcript.

It becomes even more interesting for the modern reader to see where Paul goes with his use of apocalyptic speech.

1 Thess 5:1–11: Concerning the chronology of the great events to come: friends, you don't need to have [anything] written to you. ²Surely you know perfectly well that the day of the lord arrives like a thief in the night. ³When everyone expects peace and security, that's just when ruin strikes without warning, or [it is] like the sudden onset of birth contractions in a pregnant woman—no one can avoid such events. ⁴But you, friends, are not in the dark so that the day [of the lord] would catch you by surprise like a thief. ⁵Rather, *you are enlightened people, a people of the day. We are not denizens of the night living in the dark.* ⁶Therefore, let us not sleep through life as others do, but be fully awake and in control of ourselves. ⁷*"Nightpeople" are always asleep and drunkards are never sober,* ⁸but since *we are "day-people" let us always be in control of our senses* and let us protect ourselves

with the armor of our confidence in God and our unselfish love for one another and with a helmet of the hope of our liberation. ⁹For God has not set us up for condemnation, but intends for us to be liberated through our lord Jesus, God's Anointed, ¹⁰who died for us so that—whether we have died or are still alive—we might live together with him. ¹¹Therefore, continue to encourage one another and to support each other as you have been doing.

It is not at all unusual for the Thessalonians to be concerned with a timetable for the end times (e.g., Mark 13; Matthew 24). An apocalyptic imagination looks forward to the future, usually punctuated with indications of this progress. What is crucial to see is that Paul disrupts this expectation, this attempt to calculate the future. First, he reminds them of the very nature of the divine irruption. There is no clue; unexpectedness is precisely what it means. Indeed, the Roman political slogan of “peace and security”⁷ collapses under this consideration. The common apocalyptic trope (see Rom 8:22 below) of a woman's onset of labor has great effect. But Paul does not linger with this sense of ultimate jeopardy. He pivots back to the community and reminds them who they already have become—“enlightened people, a people of the day” (5:4). Similar to the language of Qumran, where the “sons of light” are set off against the “sons of darkness,” Paul mixes wisdom distinctions of day/night and sober/drunken with the apocalyptic edge that this condition is now in effect. While some hidden transcripts can be described as rehearsals for the end, this passage would suggest that Paul considers his speech with the Thessalonians no mere rehearsal but the beginning of active resistance. This can be detected in vv. 8–9. The military terms are quite significant. Usually they were applied to the actions of the God of Israel (cf. Isa 59:17). But here members of community are outfitted with divine attributes. (This should not be lost on us when we move to Romans 8.)

What Paul has done in exercising his free speech within the space of the community effectively charges and energizes that community to continue to move on the front of their mission. He gives them the confidence to see who they are in light of a future that is becoming real in their time and place. As enlightened people, they can shake off the false consciousness of the imperial system. In fact, they can use the wisdom/apocalyptic categories to critique those who do not detect that the system is collapsing. The Thessalonians no longer need to daydream or lose themselves in dreams to come; rather, they have become the “boots on the ground” for the Anointed.

A Declaration of Regime Change

2 Cor 5:16–21: From now on, therefore, we don't look at anyone from a worldly point of view. Even though we thought of God's Anointed in that way, we think

7. Georgi, *Theocracy*, 28.

of him in that way no longer.¹⁷Consequently, for anyone in solidarity with God's Anointed, *it is as if there is a new world order. The old order is gone, look—the new order has arrived!*¹⁸All of this comes from God who changes our relationship with the divine through the Anointed and has made us agents of this change.¹⁹God is, as it were, changing the world's relation with the divine through the Anointed, not charging their deficits to their accounts, and entrusting us with this message of change.²⁰We act as agents of God's Anointed, as if God were making an appeal through us. On behalf of God's Anointed we implore you: *Accept the new terms of our relationship with God.*²¹[It's as if] God took him, a coin in mint condition, and treated him as if he were [a] coin that had lost its value for our benefit so that through him we might be recast into the coinage of God's integrity.

In the first fragment of 2 Corinthians,⁸ Paul is engaging in what can be characterized as the “infrapolitics” of a subordinate group.⁹ Within the Corinthian community there has been some significant debate over the worth and weight of Paul and his message. He argues that the claims of his opponents rest upon the assumptions of the world that is passing away (cf. 2 Cor 3:6–18). He contends that community members already hold the key to interpreting scripture as well as history because the presence and power of God are in their midst (2 Cor 3:18). Paul has used the very vocabulary and strategy of his opposition to demonstrate that the community are already fully competent to recognize what is truly happening in their midst.¹⁰

Now it is in 2 Cor 5:16–21 that Paul continues to subvert the dominant paradigms. He engages in what can be called metaphorical play. His apocalyptic vision aligns his words. In effect, he takes given cultural symbols and concrete indicators of regime change and transmutes them to argue that a radical transformation is presently at stake. Such playfulness is exactly what can occur within the space of a dissident community. He uses the “givens” of the public transcript that would demand an expected acknowledgment and submission and re-imagines a totally new situation, reinforcing the atmosphere of freedom within the Corinthian community.

Paul's apocalyptic perspective envisions a stark division between a “worldly point of view” (*kata sarka*) and the “as it were” of a “new world order” (*kainē ktisis*). In fact, the “new order has arrived.” For Paul the dream has come true. This results in a totally new condition where God is changing the relationship with humanity through the Anointed (5:18). It should be noted that the default translation for *katallasso* (vv. 18, 19, 20) in many versions of 2 Corinthians is “to reconcile.” That would imply a return to the status quo ante. But this is not indicated in 2 Cor 5:14–21. A new situation is argued for in arresting images. Indeed,

8. Dewey, *Authentic Letters*, 121.

9. Scott, *Domination*, 183ff.

10. Dewey, *Spirit and Letter*, 131–39.

the root meaning for this verb is not “to reconcile” but “to change money,”¹¹ which leads to the sense of “exchange.” Paul is not an agent of “reconciliation” but an agent pointing to a radically new situation. His vision is not a “return” (*re-volutio*) to a past golden age, but a gesture to a future that has taken foothold. He is, in short, what we today call an agent of change. Moreover, he is encouraging his listeners to join him in this radical transformation. Such a line of argument is supported by the fact that with the coming of a new regime in the ancient world, there was usually a change in coinage. By declaring that a new order is in effect, Paul is speaking in counter revolutionary terms. His listeners would not have missed the political nuances of this language. His final line (5:21) may well be a final play upon the reminting of coinage.¹²

It is significant that Paul incorporates into his apocalyptic vision the linguistic currency of the dominating public transcript. He is doing what many minorities before and after are quite adept at: inverting the language and power structures that would hold these communities in submission. His apocalyptic vision allows him to re-imagine these images and power structures. He is encouraging his audience to play along with him in this serious business of radical transformation.

Entering the Cosmic Labor

Rom 8:18–23: I regard the sufferings of the present pregnant moment as nothing compared with the future splendor to be revealed to us.¹⁹For the whole creation eagerly anticipates the disclosure of who God’s children really are.²⁰For the purpose of the creation was suppressed through no fault of its own, but by the One who subjugated it²¹in the hope that the creation itself would be liberated from its subjection to degeneration and participate in the splendid freedom of the children of God.²²We know that the whole creation has been moaning with birth pangs till now;²³and not only the creation, but we who have savored the first taste of God’s power also sigh within ourselves while we await our adoption, the release and transformation of our bodies from their earthly limitations and fate.

Before we move into our final consideration of Paul’s apocalyptic transcript, it would be helpful to consider an example of the dominating public transcript. Rome projected through its public displays the power and attraction of its *euag-gelion*. One of the most arresting images can be found in an entablature on the Ara Pacis.¹³

11. LSJ 899.

12. The root metaphor in this verse may well be that of reminting new coins from old. This would nicely tie in the notion of a new cosmic order; not restoration, but a radical transformation—“we might be recast (*genometha*) into the coinage.” Compare P. Cair. Zen. I 59021, where *ginomai* (“become”) means “to be cast into new money.” The reminting of coinage was quite necessary to communicate to illiterate populations that a political transformation had occurred.

13. “Ars Pacis.” Spurlock Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. Wikimedia Commons.



The Ars Pacis

This incredibly beautiful scene speaks volumes about what Rome meant and wanted the world to believe in. The central archetypal female figure, with what were probably the primordial images of Romulus and Remus, offers to all the abundance, tranquility and vitality of Rome. The Pax Romana has brought this beneficial situation throughout the empire. Those who would follow Rome's attractive construction of reality would participate in this bounteous vision.

Paul's letter to the Roman communities would argue for another perspective on the public transcript of success. Employing diatribe (7:7–25), Paul puts in perspective the "best" the Roman world has to offer.¹⁴ He personifies the individual (the "ego") who has internalized the cultural expectations promised by the law (both Jewish and Roman). Assuming that the successful embodiment of law would produce freedom, the individual is shocked to realize an internal rebellion. Self-contradiction is the fate of social success. The individual who would be in total control is found to be a miserable captive. What looked like a recipe for success turns into a catastrophe.

The way out of such a fated situation is found in the community of loyalty experienced already by the Romans (8:1–17). Because of God's unimaginable act for the Anointed, the Romans share in God's power and presence, allowing them to become what the world so desperately desires. Paul sees their ecstatic baptismal experience (8:15) as the moment of human maturity.

Paul, then, situates the living community's role in the entire process of creation (8:18–25). Genesis is not over; rather, those who trust are now part of this current cosmic birth. It is crucial to see how Paul uses apocalyptic imagery to reinforce the actual participation of the community in this cosmic affair. If

14. Dewey, *Spirit and Letter*, 174–77.

we recall the apocalyptic imagery of 1 Thess 4:16–17, we find that in Romans 8 there is no lord descending from the heavens! Moreover, the allusion to the birth pains of a woman in labor in 1 Thess 5:3 now becomes the major image for imagining this apocalyptic process (no longer just an unexpected moment). We did see that Paul already in 1 Thessalonians 5 had begun to speak of the present capacity of the community. They already were “enlightened people, people of the day.” They wore what was once the armor belonging to God. Their love for one another was the way in which they could proceed. Paul furthers this sense of participation in 2 Cor 5:16–21 as he calls his listeners to participate in the work of transformation, of taking part in a radical regime change. But it is in Romans 8 that we see Paul bringing out the startling entailments of this radical change. Whereas one could juxtapose the new order with the imperial given in 2 Cor 5, here Paul brings the notion of creation front and center (and thus overwhelms the world designs of the Roman empire). He personifies creation as a woman in labor and then invites his audience to see themselves as co-laborers. The future has begun, but it is not finished. In fact, there is still much to be experienced. In effect, Paul is declaring that creation did not happen; rather it is finally happening. What is more—the future is part of the process of creation. As we have seen in 2 Corinthians 5, there is no going back to a golden age, not even to the first chapter of Genesis. Rather, Paul is declaring that Genesis 1 is only now beginning to happen.¹⁵ Creation is underway; the future is a decisive part of this creative movement, where the givens of the world are no longer demarcating, closing off, and determining the nobodies of the world. Instead, it is precisely those with no part in the dominant public discourse who participate in the construction of the future. Unlike the scenario found on the Ara Pacis, there is no return to the golden age, no posturing like the children of Rome. Instead the pains and unspoken yearnings of the communities of the Anointed find room to breathe and groan before the God of Israel. What we saw as a grass roots movement in 1 Thessalonians has been transformed into a cosmic enterprise whose outcome is still outstanding.

In these four slices from Paul we have seen that his use of apocalyptic images and tropes allows him to energize and give genuine meaning to the dramatic change in the lives of his listeners. His letters were hidden transcripts, removed from the public discourse of the day. They provided insight and direction for those who would envision an alternative to the default image of their world. Moreover, in taking over some basic imperial images and codes, Paul inverts their meaning and delivers a surprising response to those public performances.

15. Paul already anticipates this sense of Genesis happening now in 2 Cor 4:6, where the “light shining in the darkness” occurs in the community’s hearts and the image of God is truly discerned: “For the God who said, “Let light shine from darkness,” has enlightened our hearts to recognize the splendor of God in the face of Jesus, God’s Anointed.”

His listeners can begin to rehearse in their gatherings different scenarios and, in fact, are encouraged to recognize that these unspoken dreams have begun to “walk about.” As Paul continues to write, his apocalyptic vision also changes. The “escapist” scenario of 1 Thessalonians changes with the introduction of images from public conversation. Paul transmutes these tropes and images to give those sharing a dissident imaginative space new ways of negotiating their lives in the Roman world. Paul is enkindling a new conflagration; in fact, his apocalyptic energy turns those tenement meetings into nuclear reactors, where everything is subject to untold change.

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