

The *Kingdom*  
according to  
*Luke and Acts*

A Social, Literary, and  
Theological Introduction

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# Introduction

## *The Heart of Luke's Witness to the Kingdom*

With a handful of believers clenched in their grasp, the mob screamed, “These men are turning the world upside down!” Paul had been teaching in the synagogue, “explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you’” (Acts 17:3). Some in the synagogue believed. So too did “a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women” (v. 4). But others, including a sizable number of Israelites, did not accept this strange, even outlandish, word about a crucified criminal fulfilling sacred oracles of old. In fact, they found Paul’s testimony so offensive that they became “impassioned,” formed a mob, and set the city in an uproar! Searching for Paul and Silas, they attacked the household of a believer named Jason. Though Paul and Silas were not there, these defenders of Rome grabbed any of Paul’s rabble they could find and dragged them before the authorities. They demanded that these outlaws be charged for their outrageous, dangerous, world-overturning claims, insisting, “They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus” (v. 7). The people and the city authorities were indeed disturbed by what they heard, for few charges could be more serious than this. The authorities released Jason and the other believers, but only after exacting bail. Further consideration was needed. How might they deal with this troubling new movement that threatened to lead many astray?

### **Three Characteristic Cadences of Luke’s Witness to the Kingdom**

Even though this story occurs deep into Luke’s narrative, it is a fitting one with which to begin. This tale of bold witness, passionate opposition, angry

mobs, and disturbed officials represents well the vision of the Kingdom that spans both parts of Luke's two-volume work. It joins with many other episodes composed by the evangelist that make plain at least three prominent features of the "good news" he narrates and proclaims.

First, this account in concert with many others asserts in earnest that the good news of what God accomplishes in Jesus of Nazareth is world-defying news. It shatters established patterns for interpreting reality and ordering society. It is relentless and uncompromising in offering a vision of heaven and earth that turns the tables on what most people in Luke's age profess and live as true. The early disciples—as accused by their detractors in Thessalonica—really were attempting to turn the world upside down.

Second, this account among many others reminds us that our post-Enlightenment tendency to segregate "religion" from "politics" is not an appropriate lens through which to view Luke's world. In his day, life was not compartmentalized into these and other categories of action and thought. In fact, one could justly argue that to merely use the terms "religion" and "politics" with reference to the ancient world is anachronistic. Perhaps the terms should only be employed to say that these domains of ancient life along with others were inextricably intertwined. The reality was that religion and politics did mix in antiquity (and for nearly all of human history), along with economics, social standing, kinship, and most other dimensions of human society. Recall the charges brought against Paul's companions in Thessalonica: "They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus." To confess Jesus as Lord and Savior had a disturbing corollary. It implied that anyone else who might claim those titles was an impostor before humanity and heaven. Embracing the Kingdom—from Luke's perspective at least—was at once a religious, political, social, and even economic act.

Third, this account among many others also conveys Luke's recognition that the proclamation of the Kingdom elicits highly impassioned reactions. Luke knew well the connection between worldview, storytelling, and emotion. For many in Luke's day, the gospel message was a misguided, even dangerous assault on the way the world is and, frankly, should be. For others, that same word was a heaven-sent, nightmare-ending call to awake to the bounty and blessing of a homeland they had always hoped awaited them despite so many indications to the contrary. Thus, we see some characters in Luke's narrative rant with rage and others erupt in songs of deep joy, some respond with obstinate dismissal and others with awestruck recognition of what it truly means to be blessed. But it is not only the emotions of his characters that concern Luke; he also seeks to elicit an emotional response from his recipients through

his own telling of the gospel story. As an extraordinarily gifted writer, Luke uses various literary forms and devices to compel Theophilus and others to experience—intellectually as well as affectively—what is at stake in the allegiances they claim.

## Corresponding Cadences of This Guide to Luke’s Narrative

This study aims to introduce readers to Luke’s two-volume work, focusing on its urgent call for Theophilus and others to embrace Jesus and the Kingdom of God. The three characteristic features I just identified will guide our investigation of the key historical, social, literary, and rhetorical features of Luke-Acts.

### *Luke’s Vision within the First-Century Roman World*

The intertwining of numerous social realities in Acts 17 and the rest of Luke’s narrative is, as noted above, characteristic of the ancient world. Only somewhat recently have commentators begun to appreciate the various ways in which the testimonies of the biblical authors both reflect and address the social, religious, political, and economic realities of their day. As a result, a growing number of scholars now view knowledge of the biblical writers’ social world (including norms, values, characteristic patterns of interaction, resource distribution, social and political structures, religious affiliations, and geography) as vital for understanding how the biblical writings speak to the setting and circumstances of their audiences. Similarly, my discussion of Luke’s story of the Kingdom’s arrival will be informed by what has come to be called (within the field of biblical studies) social-scientific analysis. Drawing from cross-cultural anthropology, it will use those models and insights that seem particularly relevant for engaging the myriad ways in which the first-century Roman world is reflected in Luke’s portrait of the Kingdom.

Part 1 invites readers into Luke’s social setting. Chapter 1 reviews the social, economic, and political structures of the Roman world, the role of religion in facilitating those structures, and the character of the Roman Empire as a realm of disparity and want. Chapter 2 investigates the Israelite contexts to the New Testament’s (hereafter NT) proclamation of the “Kingdom” or “Reign of God” (ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ).<sup>1</sup> Here I propose that it is best to understand

1. I will avoid using “Jew” and “Jewish” to refer to those persons, groups, and beliefs connected to Israelite religious tradition, unless I am citing the perspectives of other scholars or biblical texts that use these terms. Instead, following the lead of John H. Elliott (see “Jesus the

the early Christian usage of this term as signifying not a distinct concept but rich formulations—narrative in shape and function—of the arrival of God’s long-awaited reign. The “kingdom stories” proclaimed by Jesus and his early followers were adaptations of those told by Israelites before them. In the centuries leading up to the Common Era (CE), these stories were characterized by both incredible variation and their shared enactment of three fundamental claims: (1) Yahweh is King of Israel and Ruler of the universe; (2) the current order of creation and state of God’s people are not in alignment with God’s will; and (3) God will act to reorder creation into alignment with God’s intentions. Chapter 3 presents my understanding of Luke’s social location as a member of the elite (likely the Israelite elite) and the significance of this realization for better appreciating the rhetorical edge of his narrative.

### *The Artistry and Pathos in Luke’s Proclamation*

As stated above, Luke knew well the connection between emotion and worldview and the potential to challenge and transform worldviews through the art of impassioned storytelling. I also argued above that Luke was not simply interested in *portraying* emotion as a common reaction to the proclamation of the gospel. Rather, like other writers before him, he frequently *employed* “pathos” (passion) as a rhetorical tool, here to lead Theophilus and the rest of his audience to appreciate what was at stake in their own response to Jesus and the Kingdom of God. Consequently, part 2 will help readers attend to the ways Luke shapes his narrative to engage both the heads and the hearts of his audience. Chapters 4–7 examine Luke’s use of a host of literary techniques and conventions, including various generic forms (birth narratives, genealogies, miracle stories, etc.), repetitive patterns and parallelism, the citation of or allusion to Israelite traditions, and character speech (direct and indirect discourse). Thus, part 2 summarizes what many scholars have come to know and appreciate about Luke’s narrative artistry.

Chapter 8, however, invites readers into largely uncharted territory. Building on chapters 4–7, this chapter unveils some of the ways in which Luke marshals these and other literary techniques in order to elicit an emotional reaction from his recipients. This is a dimension of Luke’s narrative artistry that, in my view, has not been sufficiently explored. As a gifted writer, Luke knew that emotion was an effective, even subversive, means of drawing Theophilus

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Israelite Was Neither a ‘Jew’ nor a ‘Christian’: On Correcting Misleading Nomenclature,” *JSHJ* 5 [2007]: 119–54) and others, I will adopt the preferred terminology of Israelites in Luke’s day, employing “Israel,” “house of Israel,” “Israelite(s),” and “children of Israel.”

and others into his narrative and compelling them to entertain the vision of the Kingdom it proclaims.

### *The World-Defying Character of the Kingdom*

For a time, it was common for scholars to argue that one of Luke's main objectives in writing his narrative was to demonstrate to Roman leaders that Christianity was politically and socially benign, posing no threat to the current world order, and that it should be regarded as another sect of an accommodating Judaism. As we shall discuss in chapter 10, this view is still held in varying forms by some scholars today. Yet I concur with others who find that Luke intended nothing of the sort. Instead, as indicated regarding Acts 17, the gospel proclaimed by Luke is one that calls upon all humanity to turn their allegiance from Caesar and the kingdom of Rome to another realm and another as Lord. Luke's aim was not accommodation but resistance. He considered the reign of God to be not a benign reality but a deeply subversive and disturbing force that was already undermining the foundations of Rome and all earthly claims to power. Luke was promoting nothing less than an entirely new way of life that offered incredible blessing for both peasant and elite.

Accordingly, after we have unpacked the broad contours of Luke's socio-historical context and specific tendencies of Luke's narrative artistry, part 3 will review the primary contours of Luke's kingdom story and engage the main rhetorical impulses of his narrative. When the evangelist's narrative rhetoric is encountered against the background of his first-century world and his own social location, these emphases stand out in sharpest relief: (1) the unassailable rule of Yahweh and the advancement of God's Kingdom through Jesus, the divine Son of God and resurrected Lord of all (chap. 9); (2) the manifold ills of this world due to demonic perversion, elite greed and oppression, and the faithlessness of many; and (3) Luke's celebration of God's still-unfolding age, which opens the way for all to turn aside from the darkness plaguing this world and enter into God's realm of blessing (chap. 10).

### **Author, Sources, Dating, Unity, and Genre**

Several other subjects are also important to the study of Luke-Acts, and my judgments on some of these matters shape my analysis in the following pages: authorship, sources, the dating of the work, the relationship between the two "volumes" of Luke's kingdom story, and the Greco-Roman genre to which Luke-Acts most closely corresponds.



### *Author, Sources, and Dating*

Although in chapter 3 I will argue for Luke's social location as a member of the elite, as well as offer some informed speculation that he was Israelite, we are on less certain footing when trying to identify the evangelist more specifically. Several early Christian traditions assign the authorship of the Gospel and Acts to "Luke," likely indicating the companion of Paul identified in several epistles by the same name (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). Five surviving witnesses dating from the end of the second century into the early third century CE provide this testimony.<sup>2</sup> The title "Gospel according to Luke" is found in the oldest extant (surviving) manuscript of the text P<sup>75</sup>, a papyrus codex dating from 175 to 225 CE. The Muratorian Canon, dated by most to 170–90, lists a number of works deemed authoritative by Christians, including most of what later compose the NT; among them is "The third book of the Gospel: According to Luke." The canonical list further states, "This Luke was a physician," presumably alluding to Colossians 4:14. The second-century theologian Irenaeus also names Luke as a companion of Paul and the writer of Luke-Acts, and considers him the same figure identified in Paul's Epistles. In addition, the ancient, extratextual "Prologue to the Gospel," also dating from the end of the second century, attributes the Gospel's authorship (and that of Acts) to Luke and identifies him as "a Syrian of Antioch, by profession a physician, the disciple of the apostles, and later a follower of Paul until his martyrdom."<sup>3</sup> Finally, Tertullian, in his writings opposing Marcion, similarly identifies the writer of the Third Gospel as Luke, a companion of Paul, and describes Luke's Gospel as a digest of Paul's teaching.

Scholars, however, debate the reliability of these traditions because the work itself is anonymous, and the earliest of these traditions date to about one hundred years after Luke-Acts was likely composed. Moreover, some scholars argue that several discrepancies between Acts and Paul's Letters in their respective portraits of Paul and his teaching undermine the claim that the writer of Acts was a companion of Paul. The more salient of these inconsistencies include the following: Paul's Letters do not mention the miracles he performs in Acts; the Letters offer accounts of Paul's movements and experiences that sometimes conflict with or are not corroborated by Acts; Paul's theology as can be discerned from his Letters is in tension with the preaching of Paul as presented in Acts, including subjects such as the use and place of the law, the salvific significance of the resurrection, and the importance of the return of Christ.

2. For the following summary I am indebted to Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I–IX*, AB 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 34–41.

3. Cited in *ibid.*, 38.

Despite these discrepancies, the occurrence of the first-person plural (“we”) to refer to Paul and his comrades in several places throughout Acts does suggest that the writer of Luke-Acts, whether “Luke the physician” or not, was a sometime companion of Paul and eyewitness to certain events of Paul’s ministry. The narrator of Acts includes himself among those called to preach the gospel in Macedonia (Acts 16:10), and then travels with Paul and others from Philippi (20:5–6). From there, “we” journeyed to Assos, Mitylene, Samos, and Miletus (20:13–15), and eventually to Tyre, Ptolemais, and Jerusalem (21:1–17). Later, after Paul’s hearings, the writer includes himself in the troop that set sail with Paul (now a prisoner) for Italy (27:1), finally arriving in Rome after a shipwreck at sea and three-month winter layover on the island of Malta (28:11–16). The most commonly held explanation for this grammatical phenomenon is that the writer of Luke-Acts was a companion of Paul and joined Paul on some of his travels. What this potentially tells us about Luke is that he joined the Jesus movement sometime in the mid-50s or earlier and ministered for a time alongside Paul.

In my mind, the discrepancies we find between Acts and Paul’s Letters can be explained by Luke’s limited companionship with Paul, the amount of time that likely transpired between Paul’s ministry and the writing of Luke-Acts (twenty to thirty years), and Luke’s desire to cast Paul’s character in ways that were consistent with his own perspective.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, I think it best to understand the function of the “we” passages the way they are most naturally regarded by most readers: to indicate that the writer participated in some of the events he describes. For the sake of convenience, and with a slight nod to received tradition that may very well be accurate, I will continue referring to the writer of Luke-Acts as “Luke.”

In terms of Luke’s sources, I follow the lead of most scholars in adopting the two- (or four-) source hypothesis for explaining the literary relationship between the Synoptics: Luke, like Matthew, used both Mark and another source (commonly designated “Q”) when composing his Gospel. Thus, in my discussion to follow, I will sometimes compare traditions in Luke with their earlier counterparts in Mark and, where relevant, their parallels in Matthew in order to illuminate Luke’s emphases. Similarly, I will sometimes compare Luke’s and Matthew’s rendering of traditions they presumably draw from Q. Luke also frequently alludes to or cites Israelite scriptures in both Luke and Acts (see chap. 5) and even occasionally alludes to or cites nonscriptural traditions, including some found among the Dead Sea Scrolls (see chap. 3). In some

4. So also *ibid.*, 34–41. For a fuller articulation of this argument, see Karl Allen Kuhn, *Luke: The Elite Evangelist* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 1–9.

of these cases it can also be fruitful to compare the original tradition and its form as reshaped by Luke and integrated into his narrative. Luke obviously used other early Christian traditions (commonly designated “L” material) in his Gospel and Acts. Since we lack a reliable means of determining (or even guessing at) the precise contours of those traditions before Luke used them, I find it best to focus on the form in which they appear in Luke or Acts and not to speculate on how Luke may have redacted them.

With the dating of Luke-Acts, the best that can be offered is a rather broad range.<sup>5</sup> Luke’s use of Mark and his apparent awareness of Jerusalem’s destruction (see Luke 13:34–35; 19:41–44; 21:20–24) point to a date after 70 CE. Reliable historical markers on the back end include Justin’s citation (*Dialogue* 103.8) and Marcion’s use of Luke, but these do not necessitate a date earlier than 125. I think that the dating range embraced by the majority of scholars (70–90) is most likely in light of the evidence that Luke was an occasional companion of Paul. The apostle, as most conclude, arrived in Rome between 56 and 61, and this is the last indication from the “we” passages that Luke was with Paul. Even if we presume that Luke was as young as twenty-five during the latter years of Paul’s ministry, this puts Luke in his mid-sixties to mid-seventies by the start of the second century. While it is not impossible that Luke could have written Acts at that age, the closer to or further past that date we go, the less likely it seems.

### *Unity and Genre of Luke-Acts*

Several features of Luke and Acts indicate their common authorship.<sup>6</sup> Most apparent, the author addresses a certain “Theophilus” in the prologue to each volume (see Luke 1:1–4 and Acts 1:1–5), and the prologue to Acts characterizes the work to follow as the continuation of the “the first book” (i.e., the Gospel) Luke wrote for Theophilus (Acts 1:1–2). Scholars also note considerable stylistic and linguistic similarities between Luke and Acts. These features, along with the abundant parallelism, thematic development, and shared rhetorical objectives between the two works (as we shall discuss in parts 2 and 3), also convince many that not only are Luke and Acts from the same hand but that

5. For a detailed review of the various arguments concerning the dating range for Luke and Acts, see Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 1:383–401.

6. Only a few have challenged the common authorship of Luke-Acts; see, for example, A. C. Clark (*The Acts of the Apostles* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1993], 393–408), who argues for separate authors based on what he considers stylistic differences between the two works. See also A. W. Argyle, “The Greek of Luke and Acts,” *NTS* 20 (1973–74): 441–45; and J. Wenham, “The Identification of Luke,” *EvQ* 63 (1991): 3–44.

Luke's intent was for recipients to interpret both as one and the same story.<sup>7</sup> As my preceding discussion has already implied, I agree with this assessment. For our purposes, the unity of Luke-Acts not only legitimates but also necessitates our attempts to incorporate evidence from both volumes when discerning Luke's objectives. It also directs us to consider that certain aspects of the Kingdom presented in the Gospel may not be fully manifested in the immediate narrative, but anticipate events to come later in Acts (e.g., the mission to the gentiles, first announced by Simeon in Luke 2:25–35, or Jesus' promise of the "power from on high" in Luke 24:49). Conversely, we are also called to recognize that because of Luke's frequent use of parallelism, his characterization of certain characters or developments in the ministry of the believers in Acts needs to be viewed in light of certain characters or events he has portrayed in the Gospel.

The advantage of discerning the genre to which Luke-Acts, as a unified volume, most closely corresponds is that genre provides another indicator helping us to determine the evangelist's purposes for composing the work.<sup>8</sup> The two Greco-Roman genres most commonly proposed are biography and history. Ancient biography testifies to and celebrates the significance of a notable figure.<sup>9</sup> It often casts a subject within a certain historical context, and that person's significance is sometimes set in relation to a particular moment in history. But the chief aim of biographical narrative is *characterization*: portraying the figure in various situations so that his virtues and vices may be illuminated and edify the audience. To be sure, Luke-Acts does in some

7. One of the more detailed arguments for the thematic similarity and unity of the two volumes is Robert C. Tannehill's *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986, 1990). See also Keener, *Acts*, 1:550–81, or the more concise treatment in Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 6–10. Mikeal C. Parsons and Richard I. Pervo (*Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990]) argue that while Luke and Acts are unified at the *story* level of the narrative, they are not at the *discourse* level; the story content of both volumes is clearly parallel, but the method of telling the story has changed, resulting in a kind of disunity between the two volumes. Hence they refer to Acts as the *sequel* to Luke as a means of signifying the very close connection, yet organic separation, between them. In contrast, many others argue that the separation of the work into two scrolls was simply due to the practical matter of its length; see, e.g., Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 8.

8. For helpful reviews of the debate concerning the genre of Luke-Acts, see David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, LEC (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 17–115; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2–39; or Keener, *Acts*, 1:90–115.

9. Two chief proponents of the view that Luke's Gospel is best categorized as a form of Greco-Roman biography are Charles H. Talbert, *What Is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), and Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

measure manifest these biographical tendencies in its portrayal of Jesus, Peter, Paul, and others, whose actions the evangelist likely intends to be instructive for his recipients.

On the other hand, four notable features of Luke-Acts indicate its intent to address broader, historical developments as it announces the arrival of the Kingdom. First, throughout the infancy narrative and the rest of Luke-Acts, events are cast as the advent of God's plan to redeem Israel and humanity; in other words, the focus of Luke's kingdom story is on God's accomplishment of the world's long-awaited salvation, or God's ordering of "salvation history." Second, and related, God is presented as choreographing this fulfillment *through* Jesus; in other words, the focus of the narrative is primarily theocentric and secondarily christocentric. Third, when we transition to Acts, the historical character of the work becomes even more pronounced, as the narrative attends to the development and mission of the early Christian community. Several characters stand at the forefront of Luke's narrative, but none of the ways Luke draws his characters overshadows his overarching concern to show how their faithful actions and perseverance advance the emergence of God's Kingdom. Fourth, in addition to the historical purview and plotting of Luke-Acts, several of the literary techniques and devices Luke employs find closer parallels to the genre of historiography. For instance, Luke uses temporal markers (synchronisms) to date key events (e.g., Luke 1:5; 2:1–2; 3:1–2) and states in his preface that he has investigated sources of information carefully and consulted with eyewitnesses (1:2). Moreover, Luke's frequent allusions to characters and events in Israel's past (see chap. 5), and his widespread use of character speech to testify to the significance of present events within the broad sweep of Israel's history (see chaps. 6–7), show clear resemblances to Israelite historiography.

Ancient biography and historiography were flexible enough to include elements typical of other genres. But the primary factor in determining genre is the overarching purpose of the work as a whole, as evidenced by the contextualization of its constituent elements through repetition, plotting, and thematic development. From the prologue of the Gospel (1:1–4) onward, Luke-Acts tells us a story of "the matters fulfilled among us" (τῶν πεπληροφορημένων ἐν ἡμῖν πραγμάτων). Its chief focus is the inauguration of a new historical era that the faithful are called to embrace and enact with joy, devotion, and sacrifice. To be sure, Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ongoing ministry are central elements of that story, as are the actions of others. Moreover, Luke's recipients are also called to celebrate and emulate the faithfulness of these characters. Yet the actions of these figures are inextricably connected to and given meaning by the characters' participation in this decisive period of

human history. Thus, Luke's kingdom story is best categorized as an instance of Greco-Roman historiography with many formal and thematic similarities to Israelite historiography.<sup>10</sup> For "the identity-shaping, legitimacy-providing concerns that animate reader response to Luke's Gospel and its sequel center on the connection of this history to the history, and particular OT histories, that belong to the Jewish people."<sup>11</sup> In short, Luke's historical narrative is an urgent call for Theophilus and others both to "know the truth concerning the things about which [they] have been instructed" (Luke 1:4)—namely, the advent of God's long-awaited Kingdom in the ministry of Jesus and his followers—and to order their hearts and lives accordingly.

10. We will explore a number of these formal similarities to Israelite historiography in chap. 4.

11. John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 6.

# 1

## Imperium Romanum *An Empire of Disparity and Want*

As proposed in the introduction, the primary aim of Luke-Acts is to challenge Theophilus and others to abandon their allegiance to the life they know and to some extent still cherish. The world of Luke and his audience was that of the Roman Empire. While cultural patterns and conditions in the vast territory controlled by Rome surely varied from region to region or even from year to year, the survey to follow provides a baseline of what life was generally like for most in the Roman world in the first century of the Common Era. It was a realm characterized by the grossly inequitable distribution of power and resources, leaving the vast majority wanting for life's basic necessities. However, I should also note at the outset that the survey to follow focuses on those dimensions of the Roman hegemony that I believe Luke was most interested in confronting—namely, its distribution of power and resources and the belief system that legitimated those modes of distribution. But, of course, the Roman world—though dependent upon and fueled by this exploitative system—was also more than this. Rome's legacy also includes impressive works of literature, philosophy, politics, art, and architecture that remain influential to the present day. To be fair, we should keep this in mind as we attend to what many would consider the darker sides of Roman rule.

## The Rise of the Roman Empire

Power changed hands several times throughout the Mediterranean region in the centuries leading up to the Common Era. Under Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE, the Greeks wrested control of this part of the world from the Persians, who had themselves overtaken the Babylonians in the sixth century BCE. After Alexander died in 323 BCE, his vast empire was first divided between his generals and eventually became three dynastic realms that would continue for more than another hundred years: the Antiochid in Macedonia; the Ptolemaic in Egypt; and the Seleucid, from Persia across Syria to Asia. But in the latter half of the third century BCE, Greek power was seriously eroding, and much of the region was slipping from its grasp. This was largely due to the rise of Rome, which conquered the Italian peninsula, the western Mediterranean including Spain, eventually Carthage in northern Africa to the south, and Macedonia to the east. At the beginning of the second century BCE, the Seleucids were in control of Palestine and Asia Minor. However, they suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of Rome in the battle of Magnesia (Manisa in modern-day Turkey) in 190, thus losing Asia Minor, and they were also required to pay a hefty tribute to their conquerors.

The Seleucids sought to reestablish their grip on their remaining realm and initially gained some measure of stability. In 169–168, the Seleucid king Antiochus IV led semisuccessful campaigns against Egypt, acquiring significant plunder. During this time, Rome also reaffirmed its support of Antiochus' claim over Syria and Phoenicia. But then Antiochus engaged in a series of actions against Jerusalem that would galvanize the Israelite people into a protracted struggle for freedom and eventually contribute to the demise of the Seleucid dynasty. While Antiochus was preoccupied with his campaigns in Egypt, a false rumor of his death circulated in Judea. The former and disaffected high priest, Jason, sought to take advantage of the apparent vacuum of power and revolted, briefly retaking Jerusalem in 169. Before Antiochus could return, Jason was expelled from the city. However, the Seleucid ruler used the turmoil as an opportunity to reconquer Jerusalem, resulting in a series of extraordinary insults against the Israelite people. In addition to already controlling the office of the high priest and leveling burdensome taxes, Antiochus invaded Jerusalem, killing and enslaving tens of thousands, leveled its walls, stole from the temple treasury, banned the worship of Yahweh, mandated the worship of Greek gods and goddesses, turned the Jerusalem temple into a temple of Zeus, and viciously persecuted those who resisted. His attack on Jerusalem was a “reenactment of conquest” designed to legitimate his attempts to order a widespread transformation of Judean culture and to establish himself as



its inhabitants' sole master and sovereign. As Anatheia Portier-Young states: "Antiochus' methods of conquest were thus calculated to shatter the people's sense of autonomy and will to resist, so that all will and all freedom would derive from his own regime and own person."<sup>1</sup>

The Israelites revolted in 167 under the leadership of the Hasmonean family, leading to an extended rebellion known as the Maccabean Revolt. As recorded in 1 Maccabees, one of our primary sources for this period, the rebels used guerrilla tactics in a lengthy war of attrition and made slow progress toward independence. The Seleucids rescinded the ban on the worship of Yahweh in 164, shortly before Antiochus' death. Rome recognized Israelite independence in 161, making a treaty with the newly restored nation, and Israel eventually won its full freedom from the Seleucids in 142. Under the leadership of John Hyrcanus, who ruled as high priest from 134 to 104, Israel attained a significant measure of religious, political, and economic stability and regained most of the territory that it once held under David and Solomon. This political expansion continued under Hyrcanus' son, Alexander Jannaeus, and Alexander's wife, Salome (103–76). Yet the latter part of their reign and the years following it were marred by internal strife, culminating in the outbreak of civil war from 67 to 63 as the brothers Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II vied for the rule of Israel. The Roman general Pompey intervened in 63 to settle the dispute. He seized Jerusalem from Aristobulus' partisans and named Hyrcanus II high priest, but stripped him of much of his political power and placed Judea under Roman tribute.

Pompey's intervention marked the start of Rome's interest in and control over the region of Palestine. It also marked the beginning of Israelite antipathy toward Rome. Following the treaty of 161, Israelite views of Rome were generally positive. But Pompey's siege of Jerusalem in 63 resulted in much suffering and death. Once the city was in his control, Pompey led a retinue into the temple, violating the Holy of Holies. As Josephus records, "Of all the calamities of that time none so deeply affected the nation as the exposure to alien eyes of the Holy Place, hitherto screened from view" (*War* 1.152).<sup>2</sup> From now on, "the damage that Pompey had caused would remain irreparable: henceforward the name of Rome became associated with the notion of sacrilege, and that notion began to be felt in the writings of that period."<sup>3</sup>

During its years of expansion in the first century BCE, Rome itself was plagued by internal strife and fought its own civil wars. As a republic for the

1. Anatheia E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 138–39.

2. Translation from Mireille Hadas-Lebel, *Jerusalem against Rome*, trans. Robyn Fréchet, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion* 7 (Leuven; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006), 22.

3. *Ibid.*

better part of five hundred years, Rome had been ruled by the Senate, made up of elite landowners of leading families, in conjunction with magistrates (or consuls) who were elected by the citizenry. As Roman dominance expanded through military conquest leading up to the Common Era, powerful generals began to vie for control over the republic's affairs. At times, this control was pursued and practiced through alliances. The First Triumvirate included Pompey, Marcus Licinius Crassus, and Gaius Julius Caesar. But after Crassus died in battle, the triumvirate dissolved, and Pompey and Caesar fought each other for control of Rome. Caesar won control by defeating Pompey in 45 BCE. He was named dictator for life in 44, and his rule threatened to overshadow the influence of the Senate. Some senators, however, would not be so easily marginalized. Marcus Brutus and Gaius Cassius, former allies to Pompey, murdered Caesar in the Senate meeting hall. In the resulting struggle for power, consul Mark Antony, Octavian (Caesar's adopted heir), and exconsul Lepidus formed what was known as the Second Triumvirate. This triumvirate was also short-lived, leading to another bloody struggle. By 31, Octavian emerged from the fray victorious, assumed the name Caesar and the title "Augustus" (great, or worthy of honor), and became the first emperor of Rome. The office of emperor would continue to evolve over the ensuing decades, and the Senate would still hold some of its previous power, but with Octavian the transition to imperial rule in the form of an absolute monarch, or emperor, became complete. Octavian's victory marks Rome's transition from republic to empire.

### *The Pax Romana and Rule of Rome*

Octavian's rule also ushered in the era known as the *pax Romana* (Roman peace), often described as a centuries-long period of relative stability and prosperity due to the strength of Roman rule. The *pax Romana* did indeed have many benefits. Warfare and regime change were destructive events, impacting all levels of society, and the economic prosperity enjoyed during this period facilitated better nutrition, increased life expectancy, higher population levels, and access to education. But the benefits of the *pax Romana* were not evenly distributed among Rome's subjects. Far from it. Most struggled under the burden of stifling economic oppression. Moreover, Rome's conquests continued, spreading north into Europe and reaching all the way to Britain and as far east as modern-day Iraq. Even into the Common Era, many lands came under the Roman peace only after the vanguard of Roman swords. Within Rome's provinces, including Palestine, challenges to Rome's power were effectively

yet brutally suppressed by local elite loyal to the emperor.<sup>4</sup> When situations threatened to spin out of control, the response of the Roman military was inevitable and characteristically devastating for the rebels and many innocent bystanders alike.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the Israelite Revolt in Judea (67–70 CE), Roman fury resulted in the death or enslavement of thousands of Israelites, the sacking of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the temple.

### *The Many Heads of Roman Rule*

Key to the maintenance of Roman control before, during, and after this period (as was true for the Greeks and Persians before them) was the use of client kings, governors, and other officials to rule the increasingly vast regions conquered by Rome. These rulers in turn appointed others to positions of authority, cultivating “a loyal clientele among local aristocrats by dispensing certain favors or benefits for them or their cities.”<sup>6</sup> In exchange for the political and economic benefits attached to their positions, these client leaders were to assist in “keeping the peace,” providing police support when needed, collecting taxes, maintaining important civic celebrations, offering sacrifices on behalf of the emperor and Rome, and encouraging allegiance to the empire. While many of these rulers were native to the areas under their charge, “these local elites, whose cooperation with the central power was so crucial to the smooth functioning of the empire, tended to adopt many Roman ways themselves.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, along with the incursion of Roman power throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond, there arrived a second influx of Hellenistic culture, a reinforcing tide of Greco-Roman politics, religion, social structure, art, and architecture that profoundly shaped this region. For this era at least, the proverb “when in Rome, do as the Romans do” is seriously misleading, unless by “in Rome” one means the vast expanse of territory Rome came to control! Many were doing what the Romans did well beyond the city of Rome.

Palestine was no exception. Herod the Great ruled from 38 to 4 BCE. By Roman standards, his reign was impressive, albeit brutal, on many counts. He managed to navigate wisely his allegiances to Rome during its tumultuous years of civil war, and eventually secured the patronage of Octavian. He

4. See Ben Witherington III, *New Testament History: A Narrative Account* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 60, 109.

5. See Richard A. Horsley, “High Priests and the Politics of Roman Palestine: A Contextual Analysis of Evidence in Josephus,” *JSJ* 17 (1986): 435–63.

6. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Powers: Conflict, Covenant, and the Hope of the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 33.

7. James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 3.

hellenized the region in form and function, engaging in massive construction projects, including a major renovation to the temple in Jerusalem and the building of several cities that he dedicated to the emperor. He suppressed uprisings (real and perhaps imagined) and established a client network among the elite through both favors and threats. After Herod's death, the Roman distribution and exercise of power in Palestine came to be spread among three primary groups of agents. These included members of the Herodian family, who were assigned areas outside Judea; other officials appointed by Rome, such as the governor in Jerusalem, whose charge was to maintain peace and ensure the flow of resources to Rome; and the priestly aristocracy, who oversaw the maintenance of and raising of funds for the temple and governed most Israelite affairs. These leaders and the families closely allied with them controlled much of the arable land and also benefited from the revenues they gathered on behalf of Rome (more on this later). Thus, while several parties were involved in the rule of Palestine, the same sort of hierarchical pattern present in Rome and throughout the empire was in place here as well. As described by Richard Rohrbaugh,

the urban elite made up about 2 percent of the total population. At its upper levels, the urban elite included the highest ranking military officers, ranking priestly families, and the Herodians and other ranking aristocratic families. They lived in the heavily fortified central areas of the cities . . . socially isolated from the rest of society. . . . The literacy rate among them was high, in some areas, even among women, and along with their retainers they maintained control of writing, coinage, taxation, and the military and judicial systems.<sup>8</sup>

To maintain their privileged stations and power, then, the Israelite elite in Palestine (like most elite everywhere in regions controlled by Rome) had to acquiesce to Roman rule. In practice if not in spirit, these Israelites signed on to the apparent truth that Caesar ruled the world. They also participated in the hierarchical socioeconomic structure that ensured their abundance at the expense of so many. Josephus, a contemporary of Luke, stands as one example of such acquiescence. An Israelite priest who transformed himself from a general leading the fight against Rome during the Judean Revolt (67–70 CE) into a chronicler of Israelite history criticizing his fellow revolutionaries—along with a few incompetent Roman appointees—and in turn receiving the generous patronage of Roman elite, he illustrates the malleable allegiance

8. Richard Rohrbaugh, "The Social Location of the Markan Audience," in *The Social World of the New Testament: Insights and Models*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey and Eric C. Stewart (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 145–46.

of some socially ascendant Israelites. While numerous elements of Israelite sacred tradition speak against such partnering with foreign powers and the systemic neglect of the “alien, orphan, and widow,” several of the Israelite heroes of old (e.g., Joseph, David, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel) found a way to serve both Yahweh and gentile lords. Perhaps these figures provided some of the Israelite elite with a precedent that they saw as legitimating their own collusion with foreign rule. To drive this point home even further, consider this. The gate to the Israelite temple rebuilt by Herod was crowned with an eagle, the symbol of Roman rule, and sacrifices were offered daily by the priests on behalf of the emperor and Rome. Note the significance of these two realities! Even the institutional embodiment of Israel’s covenantal relationship with Yahweh and the intimate, sacred ritual of sacrifice that helped to maintain that covenant bond were not spared from the hegemonic claim that all—at least in part—owed their place and continuation to the patronage of Rome.

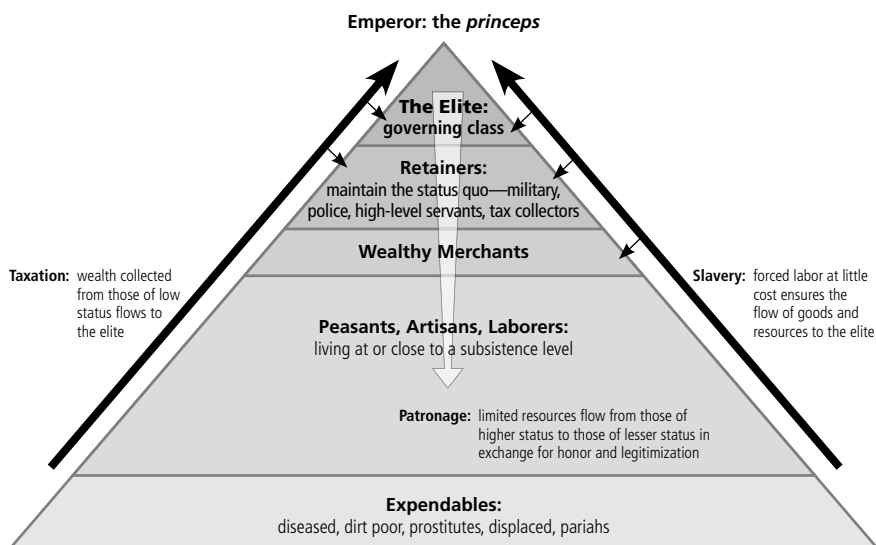
### *The Social and Economic Landscape of Empire*

Imagine this scene. A motley crew has gathered. Old and young. Some darkened from sun and labor, their skin a rough hide broken by an occasional sore. Others pale and sickly with vacant eyes. Some bent and shuffling with a limping gait. Several are thick-bodied, scarred and muscled—soldiers by the looks of them. At the front of the crowd stands a small clique of finer cloth. Erect and proud, they stiffen their faces with an air of contempt for the rabble with whom they are forced to wait. And wait they must, for their patron, Lucius, is a busy man. Or so he says. But the wait is more a message than a necessity. They are to wait *on* him. In their varying capacities they provide something he desires, and he in turn provides a token of his gracious patronage. It is never enough to satisfy. For most of them, especially those not at the front of the line, it is never enough to provide more than a brief respite of relief. Just enough to keep them coming back.

Scenes like this one replayed countless times in varying forms throughout the Roman world, and they represent well the social and economic structure of Luke’s society. The crowd, themselves manifesting a diversity of social strata queued in hierarchical order outside Lucius’ door, are there to petition one of greater rank and wealth in hopes of benefiting from his *patronage*. The function of patronage, as we shall discuss below, was not resource redistribution as much as it was the maintenance of the status quo. It was one of several mechanisms that kept folks like Lucius secure, very well heeled, and surrounded by needy devotees.

Perhaps another image will help: picture an imposing mansion of expertly laid stone alit with a golden glow and luxuriously appointed. Gardens and courtyards offer a tasteful accent to its fortress-like prominence. But stepping back and greatly widening your field of view, you note that this mansion sits atop a vast mountain, conical in shape. At the very bottom of the mountain, crammed together on the slopes of its lowest foothills, are the burrows, rudimentary lean-tos, and shacks of the poorest of the poor. Above these hovels, the bulk of the mountain is densely populated with mud-brick houses or cramped stone-block dwellings belonging to peasants, artisans, or slaves. Higher still, and now tapering severely toward the summit, is a narrow layer of what might be considered the “respectable” homes of fortunate merchants. Above them is yet another thin stratum of slightly-better-appointed homes belonging to higher-ranking soldiers, tax collectors, and police, whose task is to maintain the ordering of those beneath and above them. Finally, as the mountain crescendos to its peak, there are the dwellings of the elite, whose majesty and opulence are like in kind to that of the mansion that crowns the pinnacle. From the elite’s vantage point—and few living on that mountain would disagree—life is far better at the top. Yet for those like Lucius’ clients, the trudge upslope is tedious, and even after they have arrived at his mansion, gravity inevitably pulls them back down to where they belong.

Let us turn now from this image to the anthropological theory that informs it. To get us started, I offer the following diagram to depict the circulation of resources and the resulting power structure of the Roman world.



As the mountain metaphor I just provided suggests, the hierarchical stratification and resource distribution of the first-century Roman world—especially when these social and economic dimensions are in focus—could be usefully cast as pyramidal.<sup>9</sup> At the apex of Roman society was the emperor, father of the empire and its chief patron. To him was due the highest allegiance and honor, and he controlled the resources of the empire. Directly beneath him were other elites, the ruling class, likely composing no more than 2 to 3 percent of the population.<sup>10</sup> The elite, themselves divided into several levels, primarily consisted of properly pedigreed families who were longtime members of the aristocracy and had also established themselves as friends or clients of Roman leaders. The elite would also include recent entrants into their ranks, those few who through military prowess, political maneuvering, the acquisition of extraordinary wealth, or adoption by an elite family or patron managed to join the elite without being born into this social location.

Along a continuum from the lower levels of the elite down to the non-elite levels were retainers. This included “lower-level military officers, officials and bureaucrats such as clerks and bailiffs, personal retainers, high-ranking household servants, scholars, legal experts, and lower-level lay aristocracy. These worked primarily in the service of the elite and served to mediate both governmental and religious functions to the lower class and to village areas.”<sup>11</sup> Retainers also played a crucial role in maintaining the flow of goods and services from producers, primarily the lower classes, to the elite. While a thin slice of the population enjoyed the good fortune of being wealthy merchants (a few of whom managed to join the ranks of the elite), the vast majority of the population were slaves and peasants, including urban merchants, artisans, day laborers, service workers, and rural peasants (those owning and farming small landholdings, tenant farmers, day laborers). Beneath them were those who were viewed by most as outcasts: the dirt poor, the diseased or severely handicapped, prostitutes, and other social pariahs.

### *The Circulation and Stagnation of Resources*

The diagram above also seeks to convey Roman society’s economic “circulatory system.” The lower class produced nearly all the goods and services of the

9. Though see also the helpful diagram provided by David A. Fiensy (*The Social History of Palestine in the Herodian Period: The Land Is Mine*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 20 [Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1991], 158), which uses a vase-shaped image to focus on social stratification.

10. Fiensy (*Social History of Palestine*, 167), however, estimates that the Palestinian elite composed only 1 percent of the population.

11. Rohrbaugh, “Social Location,” 148.

empire but retained very little of those resources for its members. Two primary mechanisms ensured the flow of wealth to the emperor and the elite: various modes of taxation, and cheap labor in the form of slavery and tenant farming.

Rome heavily taxed its subjects. Scholars estimate that between one-quarter and one-third of the goods harvested or produced by peasants, artisans, and tenant farmers were required for various taxes, tolls, and tithes.<sup>12</sup> A. Ben-David estimates the combined Roman and Israelite taxes for Roman Palestine at 33.1 percent.<sup>13</sup> Such heavy taxation on the underclass resulted in a precarious existence for peasants and artisans, with the vast majority of them living slightly above, at, or below a subsistence level. Speaking of Roman Palestine in particular, Rohrbaugh writes, “The wealth of the elite was based primarily on land ownership and taxation, which effectively drained the resources of the rural areas. The ‘redistributive’ economic system, as it is called in economic anthropology, served to expropriate peasant surplus and redistribute it among those in control.”<sup>14</sup> Aggressive taxation also contributed to the high rate of debt suffered by peasant farmers. This debt, combined with onerous lending policies and unmercifully high rates of interest established by the elite, resulted in a massive foreclosure of ancestral landholdings in the years leading up to the Common Era.<sup>15</sup> Keith Hopkins estimates that from 80 to 8 BCE, about 1.5 million people, roughly half the peasant families of Roman Italy, were forced from their ancestral lands.<sup>16</sup> These figures are likely representative of conditions throughout the provinces of the empire, including Roman Palestine.<sup>17</sup>

Still another resource that greatly benefited the elite was their control of relatively cheap labor. Slavery was the engine that drove the economy, as Rome “created an institutionalized system of large-scale dependence on slave labor for the major portion of basic production.”<sup>18</sup> Estimates on the number of

12. Gildas Hamel, “Poverty and Charity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, ed. Catherine Hezser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 311; Philip A. Harland, “The Economy of First-Century Palestine: State of the Scholarly Discussion,” in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, ed. Anthony J. Blasi, Jean Duhaime, and Paul-André Turcotte (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2002), 521.

13. A. Ben-David, *Talmudische Ökonomie: Die Wirtschaft des jüdischen Palästina zur Zeit der Mishna und des Talmud* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1974), 297–98, cited in Hamel, “Poverty and Charity,” 311.

14. Rohrbaugh, “Social Location,” 145–46.

15. See Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Peasants*, Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 11–22, 137–43.

16. Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, Sociological Studies in Roman History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 67.

17. Horsley, *Jesus and the Powers*, 30–31.

18. Richard Horsley, “The Slave Systems of Classical Antiquity and Their Reluctant Recognition by Modern Scholars,” *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 32.



slaves in the Roman Empire vary among anthropologists, ranging from 25 to 40 percent of the population. But the number of slaves could have easily swelled to the higher end of that range during the years surrounding the Common Era due to Rome's conquest of the Mediterranean (including Palestine) and beyond, augmenting the ranks of those enslaved because of debt.<sup>19</sup> As more and more arable land shifted to the elite, tenant farming, sharecropping, and day labor also became central to agricultural production throughout the empire. Along with many other peasants, these field laborers migrated at or below a subsistence existence, and sharecroppers were in perpetual danger of becoming slaves themselves. Gildas Hamel notes that "especially in the case of sharecropping, the factors of production provided by landowners (land, seeds, traction, tools) were set at a very high rate, usually amounting to half of the total value of the crop, a circumstance which, together with the smallness of the acreage under contract, guaranteed the fall into indebtedness."<sup>20</sup>

In sum, aggressive taxation, an elite-controlled market system that "nick-eled and dimed" the underclass through rents and tariffs, lending policies that routinely resulted in the foreclosure of peasant landholdings, and the cheap labor of slaves, artisans, and agricultural workers all ensured the flow of wealth and resources from the underclass to the elite. This was, as declared by G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "a massive system of exploitation of the great majority by the ruling class."<sup>21</sup>

### *Power through Patronage*

Patronage, consisting of a relationship between a patron and clients, was a form of economic redistribution in which some resources were funneled to those of lower status. Returning to the diagram, note the white arrow that descends from the emperor downward. The emperor functioned as the chief patron for the entire empire, as he sanctioned the distribution of wealth to its various members. In turn, the elite would also serve as patrons to elites of lesser status and sometimes even to members of lower classes, and this would continue on down the social scale. What patrons offered their clients varied: financial or legal assistance during times of crisis, protection from

19. Hopkins (*Conquerors and Slaves*, 9) puts the number at the end of the first century BCE at 35 to 40 percent.

20. Hamel, "Poverty and Charity," 314.

21. G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 374, cited in Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of the Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*, Paul in Critical Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 7.

enemies, food, gifts, mentoring, appointments to an official post, among other favors or forms of assistance. In return, the patron could expect to receive honor, information, and political support from clients.<sup>22</sup> Often the relationship and exchanges between patron and client were face-to-face; at times, favors and requests were mediated through an intermediary or “broker.” What the patron-client system amounted to for the peasantry was—to use a modern analogy—a rather meager form of “trickle down” economics. It “functioned as the means by which elites could increase honor and status, acquire and hold office, achieve power and influence, and increase wealth. In other words, it kept the social hierarchy intact.”<sup>23</sup>

As the downward arrow in the diagram indicates, the farther patronage moved down the social scale, the smaller the dispersal of wealth. Through patronage, the greatest resources were disbursed to those already at or near the level of elite. For peasants, the resources received through patronage could be of significant temporary assistance but did not fundamentally alter their social and economic station. To put it differently, patronage among the upper classes was about favors, networking, and advancement. Patronage for the peasantry was about gaining resources that eased in varying degrees their struggle to stay out of insurmountable debt and even to survive. To put it more crassly, it simply took a lot less to buy the allegiance of a peasant than to buy that of a fellow elite.

Within Roman Palestine, elite who offered patronage to the underclass in order to gain their compliance or support included the temple establishment. The temple was the center of the Judean economy. It received tithes, offerings, and sacrifices from the populace, and also collected tribute for Rome, in exchange for its “brokerage” of divine forgiveness and blessing.<sup>24</sup> The economic benefits for the priesthood were significant, and members of the priestly aristocracy had acquired much of the arable land in the region through onerous lending policies and peasant foreclosure.<sup>25</sup> When it came to dealing with tenants and debtors, the priestly elite were expected to be just and kind to their tenants. But “they could also use the threat of short-term leases, eviction and physical violence (prison and torture).”<sup>26</sup> According to some Israelite sources, the priestly elites often opted for the latter: “Josephus and later rabbinic writings report the high priest’s predatory practices of

22. K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 65.

23. *Ibid.*, 66.

24. Horsley, *Jesus and the Powers*, 7.

25. Hamel, “Poverty and Charity,” 314.

26. *Ibid.*

sending armed thugs and goon squads to the village threshing floors to seize the tithes intended for the ordinary priests and to intimidate the peasants in other ways (*Ant.* 20.9.2 §§206–7).<sup>27</sup> While the temple establishment did collect offerings for the poor, it appears that the success of those offerings was inconsistent and the sums raised were dwarfed by the amounts set aside for personnel and the cult. As indicated by textual and archaeological evidence, more substantial and consistent assistance was provided to the poor on a community level and administered through synagogues. Synagogues served as hostels for transients and displaced persons, and funds were established for both long-term and emergency relief.<sup>28</sup>

### Consequences for Elite and Peasant

As I noted above, it is likely that the Roman economy described above yielded consequences that varied regionally due to cultural, geographic, and climatic factors.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, in some circumstances resourceful and fortunate non-elite individuals could achieve a standard of living that approximated what we might call the “middle class.”<sup>30</sup> It was also possible for high-level slaves within a prosperous household, by their own cunning and faithful service, to amass significant wealth, buy their freedom, and establish households for themselves. So not every member of Roman society was either extraordinarily well-heeled or struggling to survive. But according to most researchers, such disparity was the prevailing pattern, with the vast majority of the population (82–90 percent) living slightly above, at, or below the precarious edge of subsistence. The grossly inequitable distribution of resources described above fueled this disparity. Anthropologists commonly maintain that the top 2–5 percent of most agrarian societies likely controlled 50 to 65 percent of their territories’ goods and services, leaving 95

27. Horsley, *Jesus and the Powers*, 76–77.

28. Hamel, “Poverty and Charity,” 320.

29. Some researchers studying the economy of Roman Palestine argue for the recognition of regional variation, including the possibility that due to its fertility, Galilee may have been home to some relatively prosperous and small, family-owned farms. For a helpful review of perspectives, see Alexei Siverstev, “The Household Economy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, ed. Catherine Hezser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 230–44; and Harland, “Economy of First-Century Palestine,” 521–25.

30. A Roman-era economy scale as developed by Steven J. Friesen (“Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-Called New Consensus,” *JSNT* 26 [2004]: 323–61) and modified by Bruce W. Longenecker (“Exposing the Economic Middle: A Revised Economy Scale for the Study of Early Urban Christianity,” *JSNT* 31 [2009]: 243–78) argues that 7–15 percent of urban populations possessed moderate resources that would have provided them a far more stable existence than most slaves and artisans.

percent of the population the remaining 35–50 percent.<sup>31</sup> Hanson and Oakman argue that documented tax rates corroborate these figures for Roman Palestine.<sup>32</sup> Assuming the middle ground for these estimates (5 percent controlling 57.5 percent of goods and services), the typical non-elite person would have access to less than 4 percent of the resources controlled by an elite person.

### *Elite Living*

If you were to visit the first-century Mediterranean world, what would be immediately obvious about the elite is their access to relatively abundant material resources. Compared to the vast majority of the population, the elite lived a life of privilege and luxury. While some of the elite may have led busy lives overseeing their estates, managing their business affairs, and enhancing their social contacts, they probably had far more time for pursuing leisure activity and intellectual interests. To be sure, the elite were not removed from the vicissitudes of an agonist (competitive) society (see below). They likely encountered repeated challenges to their honor. If the elite held positions by appointment, their privileged station could suddenly change due to the whims of those above them. But much more than the vast majority, the elite avoided deficiencies and situations that dramatically shortened life expectancy. Their access to regular nutrition, superior shelter, rudimentary health care and hygiene, and clean(er) water; their avoidance of hard, manual labor; and the protection of cities made it far more likely for them to live into what we call “middle age” than the rest of society.

### *Peasant Struggle for Survival*

In contrast, most of the lower class suffered irregular access to adequate nutrition, water, hygiene, and secure shelter. The consequences of perpetually living on the edge were debilitating.

Obviously disease and high death rates were not evenly spread across all elements of the population but rather fell disproportionately upon the lower classes of both city and village. For most lower-class people who did make it to adulthood, their health would have been atrocious. By age thirty, the majority suffered from internal parasites, rotting teeth, and bad eyesight. Most had lived

31. See Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 228.

32. Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, 105. See also Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 3.

with the debilitating results of protein deficiency since childhood. Parasites were especially prevalent, being carried to humans by sheep, goats, and dogs. Fifty percent of the hair combs from Qumran, Masada, and Murabbat were infected with lice and lice eggs, probably reflecting conditions elsewhere (Zias, 1991, 148). If infant mortality rates, the age structure of the population, and pathological evidence from skeletal remains can be taken as indicators, malnutrition was a constant threat as well (Fiensy, 1991, 98).<sup>33</sup>

As a result, the life expectancy of the urban peasantry was in the low twenties, and the rural peasantry in the low thirties. Infant mortality rates were about 30 percent, and over half of all peasants living past age one would fail to make it past age sixteen.<sup>34</sup> In short, many of the underclass were struggling to survive, their days filled with worry about the next harvest; the next tax, tribute, rent, or loan payment; and often the next meal.

## The Legitimation of Elite Rule

Thus far we have examined the economic and social stratification governing the distribution of power and resources in the Roman world. As we have seen, the distribution of the empire's power and resources was characterized by extraordinary disparity, with the result that the vast majority of the population often wanted for life's basic necessities. How did the elite justify their privileged station in life? Perhaps most elite didn't spend much time thinking about it. Perhaps they assumed that this is just the way the world should be. But always in the background and sometimes at the forefront of the Roman worldview was the belief that the gods, and honor, have deemed it so.

### *The Inseparability of Religion, Politics, and Economics*

Recall from the introduction that in Rome, as in most other premodern human societies, religion, politics, social stratification, and economics were inextricably intertwined. As Everett Ferguson rightly emphasizes, in the Roman world "human life was thoroughly permeated with religion"; religion infused nearly every political, intellectual, and civic activity.<sup>35</sup> Religion was

33. Rohrbaugh, "Social Location," 154. The two studies cited by Rohrbaugh are Joseph Zias, "Death and Disease in Ancient Israel," *BA* 54 (1991): 146–59; and Fiensy, *Social History of Palestine*.

34. Rohrbaugh, "Social Location," 150, 151.

35. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 170–71.

also incorporated into most ancient persons' private lives. Though cultivating a bewildering diversity of beliefs, practices, and social forms, while unconcerned about integration and cohesion, most Romans viewed the workings of the world—natural and civic—as empowered and guided by the intersection of the divine and earthly realms.<sup>36</sup> As a polytheistic system, Roman religious tradition insisted “that gods existed, that they were many in number, that they could affect people’s lives for good or ill, that it was necessary to win their favor through offerings and rituals, and that different contexts required different offerings and rituals.”<sup>37</sup> Much of Roman religion, then, revolved around the proper civic and private practice of offerings and appeasements in order to ensure the gods’ beneficent patronage of the Roman state and individuals.

### *Representatives of the Gods*

Roman religion also presumed a cosmic order that paralleled the socio-economic stratification and patterns of Roman society. The gods, themselves arranged in a loose hierarchy, were the patrons of the empire: to them was due honor in order to ensure their blessing upon the Roman people. Accordingly, allotments from the resources of the empire were to be placed at their feet in the forms of tithes, sacrifices, and offerings. The belief in divine patronage and the dutiful practice of making offerings to the gods by the Roman people (and most others) not only paralleled but normalized and implicitly justified the similar ordering of the Roman society and its economy. Just as the divine patrons deserve and require the honor and offerings of the Roman state, so the earthly patrons of Rome, who rule as representatives of the gods, require that offerings and honor be given them.

That the elite who ascended to prominent offices represented the divine is reflected in several features of their appointment. These rulers were installed and continually celebrated in a religious context, and prayers were regularly offered on their behalf. Moreover, by virtue of their office, nearly all public officials served in a cultic capacity as religious authorities.

All those who held authority in public life, at whatever level, magistrate, pro-magistrate, legate, centurion, college president, or president of a local district, and so on—were also responsible for the cult of the community that they led. . . .

36. Rives (*Religion in the Roman Empire*, 52), among many others, emphasizes that Roman religion—apart from Judaism and Christianity—lacks a coherent and unified system of beliefs. In fact, “instead of ‘a religion,’ we can more usefully think of it as a group of loosely related but largely distinct ways of thinking about and interacting with the divine world.”

37. *Ibid.*, 86.

Every important decision involving religion, every innovation and disagreement relating to a religious problem that affected the public cult or other cults that were celebrated in public, fell within their domain.<sup>38</sup>

An important dimension, therefore, of the honor due to civic leaders was their role as cultic and religious leaders and their mediation of the nexus between human and divine spheres of reality. To put it rather baldly, the elite “used their wealth and influence to benefit the city in exchange for the social prestige and authority that their offices conferred upon them, including the implicit right to regulate the city’s relations with its gods.”<sup>39</sup> In short, the elite’s role as mediators of the divine was contingent upon their social location and economic patronage. And their representative function as religious authorities, on whom the gods’ favor rested, in turn legitimated their control of those positions and the means by which they achieved them.

The Roman tendency to associate political power with a divine mandate to rule is also manifested in what is often called the “imperial cult.” The imperial cult is probably best described as a loosely connected and varied set of practices and perspectives that associate the emperor and even the imperial family with the divine realm.<sup>40</sup> With the elevation of the emperor as the sole head of the Roman Empire, to whom all political and economic allegiance was due, there also developed the tendency to regard him as a transcendent, divine-like figure. Since no other person held greater powers or honors than those of Augustus, “the emperor and his family were granted,” by elite and many peasants alike, “honors equal to those enjoyed by the gods.”<sup>41</sup> Such exaltation was manifested in various ways. Octavian initiated the practice of deifying deceased emperors by promoting the cult of the “Deified Julius,” constructing a temple to honor the new god and appointing a priest as custodian. With Augustus’ own death a formal procedure for deification of deceased emperors began to take shape, and temples to honor deceased emperors started springing up throughout the empire. Most Romans did not worship the emperors while the emperors were living, but many did worship the current emperor’s *numen* (divine power) or *genius* (guardian spirit) in temples dedicated to those entities, a practice that Octavian himself no doubt encouraged by taking on the titles “Divi Filius” (Son of the Divine) and “Augustus” (great, or worthy of honor). However,

38. John Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 129.

39. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, 115.

40. Much of the present paragraph borrows from the helpful discussion of the imperial cult in *ibid.*, 148–57.

41. Scheid, *Introduction to Roman Religion*, 164–65.

some provincial cults worshiped living emperors as gods, and the emperors Caligula and Domitian demanded that they be treated as gods while alive, while others such as Claudius more ambiguously portrayed themselves on coinage in the guise of specific deities. As mentioned earlier, sacrifices were regularly offered on behalf of living emperors, including in the Jerusalem temple, and the Roman cultic calendar came to include notable accomplishments and events in the lives of the emperors and other members of the imperial family. Despite the various forms and practices of the imperial cult, central to its mission was the notion that the emperor was to be “envisioned as the key point of intersection between the divine and human spheres.”<sup>42</sup>

It is crucial to note the political, social, and economic significance of this religious belief. Roman power, social structure, and economy were extensions of the emperor’s honor and authority. And the emperor was “the epiphany of divine power in the hands of a mortal.”<sup>43</sup> He was the gods’ steward to the Roman people. He himself ruled with the gods’ authority and blessing. According to the various manifestations of the imperial cult, that reality was to be celebrated and cherished.

### *Honor, Pedigree, and Power*

Much of ancient society revolved around the increase and loss of honor, and honor is commonly identified as one of the most important values in the Greco-Roman world.<sup>44</sup> Put simply and helpfully by Bruce Malina, “Honor is the value of a person in his or her own eyes (that is, one’s claim to worth) *plus* that person’s value in the eyes of his or her social group. Honor is a claim to worth along with the social acknowledgement of worth.”<sup>45</sup> Honor could be either *ascribed* or *acquired*. “Ascribed honor” is honor claimed by and granted to a person due to their kinship group, or their authority within and perhaps outside that kinship group. For instance, if you were born into a prestigious and powerful family, you would likely be granted honor due to your membership in that family. Or, let’s say all the pieces of your early life fell fortuitously in place and you found yourself a member of the emperor’s court at a young age. You would also be ascribed honor due to your membership in that elite

42. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, 155.

43. Scheid, *Introduction to Roman Religion*, 165.

44. For a helpful and often-cited discussion of the values of honor and shame, see Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 27–57. The following summary of honor is indebted to Malina’s discussion.

45. *Ibid.*, 30.



group. Let's imagine again that your astute service caught the emperor's eye, and you were appointed as one of the emperor's trusted advisors. Here again you would gain honor not only by your gifted service but also by virtue of your association to another. The *emperor's* public recognition of you as a chief advisor would gain you honor in the eyes of the rest of the court and his loyal subjects (even if they were very jealous of you).

"Acquired honor" is honor that you gain by excelling over others. In other words, this is honor granted to you not simply because of your association with others but because you have demonstrated your mastery in the eyes of others. How could such mastery be displayed? Undoubtedly, many activities could potentially enhance a person's reputation: acts of heroism, the donation of funds to a public project, a distinguished military career or other service (as in the example above), eloquent oration, control of one's children, among others. Beyond these, a common form of social exchange often termed *challenge and response* also played a pivotal role in the gain and loss of honor. Challenge and response "is sort of a constant social tug of war, a game of social push and shove."<sup>46</sup> It typically contained the following elements and structure:

Challenge-response within the context of honor is a sort of interaction in at least three phases: (1) the challenge in terms of some action (word, deed, or both) on the part of the challenger; (2) the perception of the message by both the individual to whom it is directed and the public at large; and (3) the reaction of the receiving individual and the evaluation of the reaction on the part of the public.<sup>47</sup>

Malina and others assume that this form of social exchange was exceedingly common—that it characterized, in fact, nearly all of one's interaction with those outside one's kinship group.<sup>48</sup> I suspect that some social interaction occurred that wasn't so conflicted, but the Gospels themselves reveal that challenge-response was indeed a frequent form of interaction in Mediterranean culture (see chap. 4). People were hungry for honor, and they often sought to outdo one another in obtaining it or to limit the amount of honor held by a perceived rival. In short, Greco-Roman society, especially among the elite and those wanting to achieve this social level, was highly competitive. Social jockeying to gain closer proximity to cherished patrons, generous benefaction in the form of monuments or public structures, challenge-and-riposte exchanges, the amassing and display of wealth—all such activities took place within an agonistic context in

46. *Ibid.*, 33.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Malina, *New Testament World*, 36.

which the goal was to outdo one another in the acquisition of honor, and thus achieve the position and power to which honor provided access.

The agonistic pursuit of honor presumed and manifested a worldview in which all humans were not created equal. Most among the elite would have held an account of themselves and their kin that sharply distinguished them from most of the population. By virtue of their birth, kinship group (actual or “fictive”),<sup>49</sup> and place in society, by virtue of their ascribed and acquired honor, the elite saw themselves and their fellow elite as superior members of humanity. They embraced a worldview in which their pedigree, elevated sense of morality, and divine mandate included them as among a select few whose worth and potential for good was greater than that of those outside that group.<sup>50</sup> These perceptions of elevated worth—and the divine favor that the elite believed accompanied it—legitimated their near-exclusive access to and control of power and wealth. In other words, the elite made the laws, and rightly so, for they were the educated and virtuous. They established economic policy, for they knew how to best manage resources for the good of the empire and to honor the divine patrons of Rome. They spoke for the gods and goddesses, for they had the training and purity to access the divine mysteries and be the faithful guardians of sacred tradition. They ruled the empire, for their station was sanctioned by the emperor, who in turn was sanctioned by heaven and himself either a member of or closely connected to the divine realm.

## Conclusion

Throughout the Roman Empire, including Roman Palestine, elite status meant access to the currency that ran and shaped the world. In sum, Roman society enacted as a fundamental doctrine that the exercise of political, economic, and religious power was the divinely mandated and socially recognized vocation of the elite. Yet this elite worldview—which was also embraced by many outside the elite’s ranks—cultivated a social and economic hierarchy of extraordinary disparity, resulting in the concentration of incredible wealth in the hands of a few, and the experience of widespread deprivation and suffering by the many.

49. Fictive, or pseudo, kinship refers to groups of clients constituted by their commitment to a common patron; such groups are governed by the roles, obligations, and responsibilities between the patron and his or her clients, and by the clients’ mutual calling to remain loyal to the patron and to some extent one another.

50. Neil Elliott (*Arrogance of the Nations*, 30–33) helpfully lists several examples of what he terms “the hidden transcript of the powerful,” in which members of the ruling class express their contempt for and sense of superiority over the lower classes, and the need for brutal rule over them. See also Hamel, “Poverty and Charity,” 316; and Fiensy, *Social History of Palestine*, 169–70.