

REVIEW–DISCUSSION

RESPONSES TO ROMAN POWER IN *LUKE-ACTS*

Joshua Yoder, *Representatives of Roman Rule: Roman Provincial Governors in Luke-Acts*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, Band 209. Berlin, Munich and Boston: de Gruyter, 2014. Pp. xi + 368. ISBN 978-3-11-036779-9.

The classical scholar Karl Galinsky has noted with some amusement ‘the Columbus-like discovery’ of the Roman Empire by biblical scholars in the last decade or so as the historical context of the New Testament.¹ Indeed dozens of theses, books, and articles in just the last few years testify to this fascination about the nature of early Christian attitudes to Roman authority. Joshua Yoder’s 2012 thesis for Notre Dame University, published with commendable speed, is but the latest in a crowded field. It is written with great clarity, is on the whole reasonably argued, and makes a real, if modest, contribution to the subject.

As has been pointed out frequently, the author of the two-part work, the *Gospel of Luke* and *Acts of the Apostles* (*‘Luke-Acts’* for convenience) locates his narrative carefully within the context of the Roman Empire (‘In the fifteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea ...’ (*Luke* 3.1); see also the notoriously unhistorical: ‘In those days a decree was issued by the Emperor Augustus for a registration to be made throughout the world. This was the first registration of its kind; it took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria’ (*Luke* 2.1)). *Luke-Acts* is full of references to the Roman Empire from the emperor downwards, with numerous encounters with officials and administrators, including proconsuls, procurator/prefects, tribunes, centurions, local officials, magistrates, and tax-collectors; so much so that it should be an essential text not just for students of early Christianity, but also for any course in ancient history on the way the Roman Empire worked. It is particularly valuable because it provides evidence for views about Rome’s rule from outside the ruling elite. However, the underlying problem of *Luke-Acts* is just what the author’s attitude towards Rome was. Was *Luke-Acts* a political apology for the church to Rome, or was it an apology for Rome to the church? Both? Neither?

¹ ‘The Cult of the Roman Emperor: Uniter or Divider’, in J. Brod and J. L. Reed, edd., *Rome and Religion: A Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue on the Imperial Cult*, Society of Biblical Literature: Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series 5 (Atlanta, 2011) 1–22.

It is an old problem, which goes back to at least the eighteenth century.² Even if, as Yoder does, we take Steve Walton's essay of 2002 as seminal to the most recent debate,³ Walton's emphasis on the 'ambivalence' of attitudes in *Luke-Acts* simply served to accelerate the industry of scholarship with significant contributions from a number of scholars.⁴ In particular there has been the growth of postcolonial readings, which are mainly influenced by James C. Scott's ideas about 'hidden transcripts' as covert resistance.⁵ So Gilberto Medina's thesis argues that Luke's 'rhetoric of congeniality' towards Rome was really 'an ideological manoeuvre to ultimately undermine Rome from within'.⁶

Yoder engages very clearly with all these works in his survey of scholarship. However there are contributions which are not to be found in his bibliography, but continue the debate; in most cases, though not all, these will have appeared too recently for him to take on board.⁷ Yoder's strategy is to consider Luke's characterisation of Roman governors in the light of other near contemporary depictions of governors in literature so as to establish what the contemporary reader might expect and the extent to which *Luke-Acts* conforms to or diverges from these other characterisations. The works he chooses for comparison are

² C. A. Heumann, 'Dissertatio de Theophilo, cui Lucas Historiam Sacram Inscriptit', *Bibliotheca Historico-Philologico-Theologica Classis IV* (Bremen, 1720) 483–505.

³ S. Walton, 'The State They Were in: Luke's View of the Roman Empire', in P. Oakes, ed., *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, 2002) 1–41.

⁴ S. Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids, 2008); C. K. Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford, 2009); K. Yamazaki-Ransom, *The Roman Empire in Luke's Narrative*, Library of New Testament Studies (Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplementary Series) (London, 2010) 404.

⁵ J. C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990).

⁶ *The Lukan Writings as Colonial Counter-Discourse: A Postcolonial Reading of Luke's Ideological Stance of Duplicity, Resistance and Survival* (Ph.D. Dissertation; Vanderbilt, 2005). Y.-S. Ahn, *The Reign of God and Rome in Luke's Passion Narrative: An East Asian Global Perspective* (Leiden, 2006) sees both resistance and compromise in Luke.

⁷ C. Petterson, *Acts of Empire: The Acts of the Apostles and Imperial Ideology* (Taiwan, 2012); R. Munoz-Larrondo, *A Postcolonial Reading of the Acts of the Apostles* (New York, 2012); A. C. Miller, *Rumours of Resistance: Status Reversals and Hidden Transcripts in the Gospel of Luke* (Minneapolis, 2014). There are two recent books which to some extent head down the same methodical road taken by Yoder: L. Brink, *Soldiers in Luke-Acts: Engaging, Contradicting, and Transcending the Stereotypes* (Berlin, 2014); A. Kyrychenko, *The Roman Army and the Expansion of the Gospel: the Role of the Centurion in Luke-Acts* (Berlin, 2014). Yoder would have benefited from being able to consult important studies by John Moles: 'Accommodation, Opposition or Other? Luke-Acts' Stance towards Rome', in J. M. Madsen and R. Rees, edd., *Roman Rule in Greek and Latin Writing* (Leiden and Boston, 2014) 79–104; 'Luke's Preface: The Greek Decree, Classical Historiography and Christian Redefinitions', *NTS* 57 (2011): 1–22. For a review, hot off the press, of much of this recent work see M. Kockenash, 'Taking the Bad with the Good: Reconciling Images of Rome in Luke-Acts', *Religious Studies Review* 41.2 (June, 2015).

Tacitus' *Agricola*, Philo's *In Flaccum*, and Josephus' *Jewish War* and *Jewish Antiquities*. This is a fairly limited focus. There is, for example, only passing reference to Tacitus' characterisation of governors elsewhere in his work. Philo's *Legatio* is considered briefly and sceptically without considering the figure of Petronius, the *legatus* of Syria, whose characterisation in Josephus is covered by Yoder later. The most serious omissions are whole classes of evidence, most particularly inscriptions, papyri, and laws and edicts. These would be very relevant to Yoder's approach because it is clear that official decrees and documents were widely known and, in particular, were exploited to create a sort of 'safe criticism' by using the language and substance of imperial documents to influence the actions of imperial officials.⁸ Such material takes on a particular importance in the case of Luke, if John Moles is right (as he surely is) in seeing Luke's preface (*Luke* 1.1–4) as an imitation of an official decree.

Yoder's analysis of his chosen texts contains little that will be new or a surprise to Classical scholars. He demonstrates that Tacitus' *Agricola* is full of direct praise terms for Agricola as a governor, as might be expected given Tacitus' purpose. Agricola displays *moderatio*, *verecundia*, *prudencia*, *integritas*, *abstinentia*, *constantia*, *facilitas*, *auctoritas*, *severitas* and the like, and is shown demonstrating these qualities in action in the narrative. On the other hand, one way of praising Agricola is to contrast his behaviour with that of some of his predecessors. Tacitus does not hide their supposed shortcomings. Of course, the speech put in the mouth of Calgacus (*Agr.* 30–2) looks like a full-blown critique of Roman imperialism. As a result Yoder sees Tacitus' view of Roman imperialism as 'nuanced' and 'ambivalent' (this is far from the only time that Yoder uses this term in his assessments of the writers he considers). However, he concedes that the overall message of the *Agricola* is that 'the existence of governors like Agricola ... justifies Rome's imperial enterprise' (92). Philo's *In Flaccum* provides interesting material for Yoder because it contains rhetoric about both good governance and bad. Philo represents Flaccus as an intelligent assiduous governor to start with, although his purpose in this was 'so that I can present his wickedness more clearly' (*In Flacc.* 17). The decline of Flaccus is represented as firstly him falling under the undue influence of the leaders of Alexandria's Greek community, then as acting tyrannically through malice against the Jewish community and promoting civil disturbances. Josephus' works include much material about a range of governors, including several (Pilate, Felix, and Festus) who appear in *Luke-Acts*. Law and order, bribery and corruption, and the recognition of local sensitivities particularly with regard to the Jerusalem Temple are at the heart of his judgements.

Yoder's discussion of this material is on the whole sensible and measured, although his discussion is set out in an unnecessarily clunky manner. He deals

⁸ F. Ahl, 'The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome', *AJP* 105 (1984): 174–208.

with each author individually; each chapter is set out in the same way. Yet from early on he clearly recognises that all these authors, despite their diverse backgrounds, are using the same paintbox, as it were, to portray Rome's governors and Roman rule. A key issue for Yoder's approach is the extent to which open criticism of the behaviour of individual governors can be taken as evidence of doubts about, or even resistance to, Rome's imperial rule. Here again his discussion would have benefited from a much broader approach.

Within the Roman elite there had long ago evolved a full-blown critique of Roman imperialism. So Cicero *de Imp. Pomp.* 65 proclaims publicly that 'it is difficult to express the hatred in which we are held among peoples overseas because of lusts and crimes of those we have sent in recent years to govern them', although in the same speech Pompey is represented as an exceptional magistrate, praised for his *temperantia*, *continentia*, and his accessibility and trustworthiness. Sallust in his *Histories* 4.69 can put a critique of Roman imperialism in a supposed letter from Mithridates, as later Tacitus does in Calgacus' speech in his *Agricola* 30–2. From an early date in the expansion of the empire the Roman elite sought to put in place legal mechanisms for the punishment and righting of the most egregious wrongs committed by governors in the name of Rome. Their motivation was prudential. Outrageous acts by governors could inspire unrest and rebellion; they undermined the patronage relationship between members of the elite and the provincials and the argument that being part of the empire was to the benefit of the provincials; the ill-gotten gains made by some governors could be viewed with resentment and jealousy by their peers. However, it was equally clear to all that the measures taken against corrupt governors frequently failed. So it is no surprise to find in contemporary authors frank assessments of the corruption shown by some governors, but that is not to be taken as suggesting opposition to Roman imperialism as such.

For the provinces there were significant changes with the coming of the Principate, change of which Yoder needed to take fuller account. In one sense it would be difficult to argue that matters significantly improved. The record of corruption and mismanagement continues, though there are further administrative and legal attempts to counter it.⁹ The key difference was the existence of the emperor himself. Whereas under the Republic provincials felt that even if they could get their case heard in Rome, they were being judged by men whose sympathies largely lay with their fellow members of the ruling elite, under the Principate there grew up a feeling, enthusiastically fostered by the emperors themselves, that 'somebody up there loves me', that if only I can get through to the emperor I can get justice. As Tiberius is supposed to have said, 'I want my sheep shorn, not shaved' (Cass. Dio 57.10). A governor had to take account of the fact that provincials might report adversely on their behaviour

⁹ See P. A. Brunt, 'Charges of Provincial Maladministration under the Early Principate', *Historia* 10 (1961): 188–227 (= *Roman Imperial Themes* (Oxford, 1990) 53–95)

to the emperor with potentially serious consequences. So when, in John's Gospel (19.32), the accusers of Jesus are depicted as responding to Pilate's attempts to release Jesus by shouting, 'If you let this man go, you are no friend to Caesar', the threat is no idle one. Of course, the most notable pertinent example for our current purposes is Paul's own appeal to the emperor, when he felt that he would not get a fair hearing at the tribunal of the governor in Judaea (*Acts* 25.32).

It is true that the threat of violence remained as the ultimate sanction of the Roman Empire, as the Jews found much to their cost in AD 70 and in the first half of the second century. Virgil's *pacisque imponere morem, parcere subiectis, et debellare superbos* (*Aen.* 6.852: 'to impose the practices of peace, to spare the conquered and war down the proud') is a succinct summary of Rome's imperial outlook. But with the empire came peace and the very considerable benefits of secure trade, for which archaeology, in particular of wrecks, gives ample evidence, as does the author of *Revelation* 18.11–19, when he lists as principal mourners of the destruction of the new Babylon, Rome, all the traders in both luxury and staples goods heading for the markets of Rome (a theme which draws from another well-known aspect of the internal critique of the consequences of imperialism, the growth of *luxuria*). With peace and economic development came a growing willingness to accept the existence of the Roman Empire. The speech in Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.74 of the Roman general Cerealis which outlined how the benefits of empire were shared widely by Rome with provincial elites evoked a picture of empire which was increasingly shared across the empire. On this there was a growing consensus. In this regard Yoder would have benefited from considering Clifford Ando's brilliant, though controversial, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley, 2000), where the case for consensus is argued powerfully. There are good theoretical explanations as to why this consensus is likely to emerge. Mancur Olsen, deserves to be better known.¹⁰ Taking the example of the Chinese Warlords in the 1920s, Olsen shows how it is in the interest of people to prefer and support warlords who establish effective long-term control of an area. Such 'stationary bandits', as Olsen terms them, can be encouraged to take a longer perspective, to take their 'theft' in the form of regular taxation rather than wholesale plunder, to provide protection from other 'bandits' so as to secure their control of the resources of their area. Equally it is in the interest of the subjects to encourage the warlord to take this long-term view, to give them a sense of security by demonstrating their loyalty and to seek to exploit the system to encourage the ruler to act in their interests as well. It should be noted that in this interpretation of the underlying logic of empire, there is little place for the

¹⁰ 'Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development', *American Political Science Review* 87 (1993): 567–75. I briefly outlined its usefulness in J. Paterson, 'Autocracy and Political Economy', *MedAnt* 7 (2004): 587–88.

postcolonial interpretation of subjects' views of their rulers as 'hidden transcripts': on their face expressions of support but underneath subversive.¹¹ To his credit Yoder recognises this (38): 'these interpreters do not fully do justice to the ways in which Luke may have been integrated into the world (and worldview) of the colonizer/oppressor'.

The growing consensus of acceptance and, indeed, encouragement of the Roman rulers was a rational response to a situation which most felt they could not change and many sought to turn to their advantage. That acceptance, grudging as it may have been on occasion, can be seen in the speech which Josephus *Jewish War* 2.345ff. puts in the mouth of Agrippa II in trying to head off revolt by the Jews, and which Yoder considers briefly: 'Nothing turns aside blows like patient submission, and the passivity of the persecuted arouses sympathy in the persecutor ... Grievances can soon be corrected; the same governor will not be here forever, and his successors are almost sure to be more reasonable' (the same point is made by Cerealis in Tacitus *Hist.* 4.74). Yoder notes that the responses to Roman rule by his chosen authors, different as they are in status and situation, are all remarkably similar and 'suggest that there was a common discourse about governors in the first century' (129). They are examples of the consensus views of the Roman Empire to be found everywhere. It is true that Simon Swain influentially argued that there was something distinctive about the eastern Greek views of the empire; but Jesper Madsen has recently shown that such views are found in both West and East in both Latin and Greek authors.¹² Within such a context criticism and condemnation of bad governors is shared by all from the emperor downwards. It is 'safe criticism' (to adopt Ahl's term) and does not carry with it broader criticism of Roman imperialism as such.

In the second half of his work Yoder tackles the representation of governors in *Luke-Acts* to see whether and to what extent Luke shares the approach to governors found in Tacitus, Philo, and Josephus. He demonstrates clearly that Luke's assessments of Roman governors share the values and approaches of these authors. It is notable that there is very little direct characterisation of governors in Luke; only rarely does he employ adjectives which imply value judgements. A key exception is Sergius Paulus, the governor on Cyprus, who is described as 'intelligent' (*sunetos*) (*Acts* 13.7); Paulus, of course, goes on to be represented by Luke as a Christian convert. Felix and Festus, who have to deal with Paul and the accusations against him, are treated, as Yoder concedes, with little overt criticism. In Felix's case it is confined to *Acts* 24.24–7, which

¹¹ An approach derived from the brilliant and hugely influential J. C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990).

¹² S. Swain, *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Roman Empire AD 50–250* (Oxford, 1996); J. Madsen, 'Patriotism and Ambitions: Intellectual Response to Roman Rule in the High Empire', in Madsen and Rees (2014) 16–38.

suggests that his failure to bring the case of Paul to a close was down to the fact that he had a Jewish wife, that he hoped for a bribe from Paul, and he sought to find favour with the Jews. Festus is represented as efficient and independent. Luke (*Acts* 25.9) does claim he sought to ingratiate himself with the Jews; but in the explanation of the issues which Luke puts in Festus' mouth offers a different and reasonable account of his actions. As Yoder (332) acutely points out, Luke in his treatment of Felix and Festus 'seems to speak to an audience that values the opinion of a Roman court and thus needs to ascribe the governors' failure to acquit Paul to their personal moral failings'. It is curious that Yoder takes an unnecessarily critical view of Annaeus Gallio's behaviour in Paul's appearance before his tribunal in Corinth (*Acts* 18.12–17). He is grudging over Gallio's important decision to refuse even to hear the case—hardly 'high-handed', as he suggests and there is nothing in the narrative to suggest that this was Luke's view. However, the key judgement has to be on Luke's treatment of Pilate.

Unlike in the other Gospels Pilate in *Luke-Acts* is not confined to the Passion narratives (see *Luke* 3.1–2, 13.1 and *Acts* 3.13, 4.27–8, 13.27–8); but it is Luke's account of Jesus' appearance before Pilate that is the most important (*Luke* 22.66–23.25). Luke has clearly derived his narrative from Mark, though this is occasionally contested, but he has adapted Mark in a number of significant ways, as Yoder shows. Luke has removed elements in Mark which could be taken as disrespect by Jesus of Pilate and his tribunal. Indeed, he shows much more interest in the procedures before Pilate than the appearance of Jesus before the Jewish council. Above all Luke emphasises Pilate's statement that Jesus was not guilty of anything.

So Yoder's detailed analysis confirms the conclusion of many other scholars that *Luke-Acts* goes out of its way to avoid overt criticism of the Roman Imperial system and its representatives. He is part of the general and growing consensus about the Roman Empire that emerged throughout the empire in the first century AD. It is pity then that Yoder does not fully consider the actual historical context in which *Luke-Acts* was produced, above all that *Luke-Acts* are written post-AD 70 (perhaps several decades later) and the destruction of the Temple. Martin Goodman, in *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (London, 2007: perhaps the most surprising omission from Yoder's bibliography) has shown that there was good reason for Christians to seek to distance themselves in the eyes of Rome from the Jews of Judaea in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple. Yoder's interpretation of Luke fits in with this.

The impact of Yoder's arguments is lessened by his assumptions about the intended audience for *Luke-Acts*. He, like many others, sees *Luke-Acts* as addressed to a Christian audience. There is the fraught problem of the addressee of *Luke-Acts*, Theophilus (the name in itself invites justifiable scepticism as to

whether he is a real person). Real or not, Theophilus is represented as being aware of earlier Christian writings (*Luke* 1.1–4), but this does not necessarily mean that he is a Christian. Most importantly, he is addressed by Luke as *kratiste* ('most powerful'), a Greek term used regularly to translate the Latin title *egregius* for someone of equestrian status. So *Luke-Acts* is very likely addressed to a Roman official. If *Luke-Acts* is aimed at officialdom in the Greek and Roman world rather than just the Christian community, then Yoder's conclusions take on a much greater power. Luke demonstrates a detailed knowledge of Roman systems; his competence in Greek prose and rhetoric, his allusions to classical literature, and the fact that his assessments of Roman governors reflect the broader consensus in other contemporary literature are of much greater significance if Luke's intended primary audience is the Roman authorities. Luke's case is centrally a persuasive argument that Christians should have the same access to the justice system of the empire and the same protections as others. Further, he demonstrates that Roman officials have a history of extending those rights to the first generations of Christians by his detailed accounts of these early encounters. This also provides an explanation for Luke's decision, curious at first sight, to stop his account before the death of Paul. This must be deliberate on the author's part, because *Acts* 20.25 and 21.13 can be taken as allusions to Paul's death. But Paul's martyrdom at the hands of the Roman authorities, perhaps by order of the Roman emperor, does not fit in with the main thrust of Luke's purpose in his work. In my view that thrust is the same as Josephus' collection of Roman decrees in favour of Jews (Josephus *AJ* 14.186): 'It seems to me to be necessary here to give an account of all the honours that the Romans and their emperor paid to our nation, and of the alliances they have made with it, that all the rest of mankind may know what regard the kings of Asia and Europe have had to us, and that they have been abundantly satisfied of our courage and loyalty.' The same motivation can be seen in epigraphy in the collection of decrees and letters inscribed on the so-called archive wall of the theatre at Aphrodisias in Caria, which was a public display designed to advertise the favours shown by Roman officials and government towards the people of Aphrodisias.¹³ The best way to persuade officials to show favour to you was to cite precedents set by earlier generations.

There is, however, a fairly large elephant still in the room. It is only in the last sentences of his work that Yoder mentions the role of the Roman emperor in *Luke-Acts* as a subject worth further analysis. The term *basileia*, 'kingdom', occurs over forty times in Luke's Gospel and eight times in *Acts*. On almost all occasions it is the 'kingdom of God' that is referred to. It is represented by *Luke-Acts* as central to the purpose both of Jesus (e.g. *Luke* 4.43: 'I must give the good news of the kingdom of god to the other towns also, for that is what I was

¹³ J. M. Reynolds, *Aphrodisias and Rome* (London, 1982).

sent to do') and of Paul (e.g. *Acts* ends with Paul 'proclaiming the kingdom of God' (*Acts* 28.31)). Many have claimed that the term is a challenge to the rule of the Roman Emperor. But this would undermine the clear purpose of *Luke-Acts*. It is true that Luke has Mary in the Magnificat claim: 'he has brought down rulers from their thrones' (*Luke* 1.52), but this has on the one hand plenty of precedent in Jewish texts (*Daniel* 2.21: 'he removes kings and sets up kings'; cf. *Daniel* 4.30, 1; *Samuel* 2.6–10; *Psalms* 113.6–8) and on the other hand reflects a commonplace in the Greco-Roman world that kings ultimately can be punished or destroyed by the gods. Further the kingdom of God, in which the order of this world will be overthrown, belongs to the end of time and is represented as such in apocalyptic literature as a consolation to the poor and downpressed of this world (see e.g. *Luke* 22.25–30). It is not used by Luke in any way as a revolutionary idea for this world.

This is rich territory. *Luke-Acts* deserves great study by more Roman historians. Yoder offers a clear, straightforward, indeed at times slightly pedantic analysis, which deserves attention. He could have been bolder in his conclusions. To one, like myself, who has examined dozens of doctoral theses in his time, Yoder's text still bears the clear imprint of its origins. Doctoral students tend to hedge their bets, give some weight to all views, in the hope of not disconcerting or upsetting their examiners, on whose decision their future depends. Come to think of it, this exactly parallels what subjects of the Roman Empire sought to do in their dealings with their rulers.

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