

2

Social Location of the Audience and Ancient Worldviews on Suffering

INTRODUCTION

Since suffering is an existential reality, the challenge for modern interpreters of Romans is to read its references to affliction in terms of the experience of the first-century audience. It is, therefore, important for a study of the letter's theology of suffering to include a survey of the social location and worldview of the audience as a corrective to our own assumptions.

In this chapter we will explore the historical evidence available to us, and outline, in general terms, the kinds of suffering members of the house churches in Rome experienced. In particular, we will discuss the socio-economic hardship that first-century Roman believers suffered, as well as the types of religio-political injustice that they experienced. We will discover that hardship and injustice were intertwined, and were often embedded in the interconnected social, economic, religious and political systems and structures of the Roman Empire. The audience's suffering should, then, be understood in the context of a web of interrelated systemic disorders in the world. Finally, we will examine ancient worldviews in relation to suffering, which will provide background information about the symbolic universe shared between the letter and its audience. Special attention will be given to perspectives on the educative value of suffering, the notion of retributive justice, and the suffering of the righteous.

Before we start our discussion, some clarifications regarding our terminology are in order. The term “socioeconomic” is used to express the fact that social and economic realities are intertwined. Hence, those who had a low social status would often experience economic scarcity. A beggar, for example, was not only economically poor but also socially inferior, and these two realities reinforced one another. Conversely, abundant possessions often reinforced social superiority. Likewise, the terms “religio-political” and “socio-political” highlight the fact that politics, religion, and social systems were interconnected in the ancient world. Caesar was the supreme political leader, and his rule was considered to have the blessing of the gods. And of course the way he ruled had significant impact on the social life of Rome’s inhabitants. In fact, religio-political and socioeconomic systems were often intertwined, for the divinely sanctioned Caesar ultimately controlled the social and economic systems of the Empire. Further, we need to avoid misunderstanding “injustice” by viewing the term narrowly through modern lenses. When we speak of “injustice,” we do not necessarily refer to the injustice done to people in a flawed judicial system (though this could well be the case). Nor is it only about economic inequality between the rich and the poor (though this may be included). Instead, religio-political or socioeconomic injustice, for the purposes of our discussion, refers to the oppression and exploitation caused by those in positions of political, religious, social, and economic power.¹ For example, slaves might be exploited by their owners because of their social status, and their slavery would have resulted from a political and economic system in Rome that was built on the Empire’s military conquests.² With the meanings of these terms clarified, we are now ready to survey the types of hardship and injustice suffered by the audience in Rome.

SOCIOECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND INJUSTICE

Socioeconomic Profile of the Christ-Community

There has been a renewed debate concerning the economic situation of the Pauline house churches in recent scholarship.³ The emerging evidence

1. Cf. Morley, “The Poor,” 36, who recognizes the interconnectedness between poverty, political, social, and legal structures in ancient Rome.

2. Our way of defining “injustice” does not, however, mean that exploitation always happens when there is a power imbalance between the socially/economically/politically powerful and powerless. A slave owner, for example, can be kind and generous to his/her slaves.

3. The study of poverty in ancient Rome is no simple matter. The following survey

indicates that a large proportion of the earliest believers lived at or below subsistence level. We will briefly discuss the debate and outline a possible economic profile of believers in first-century Rome. After that we will look at the profile of a model craft-worker house church, which will provide further information about the social and economic life in ancient Rome.

For years, many scholars believed that the Pauline churches consisted of a cross-section of urban society, with a preponderance of artisans and traders, who were relatively wealthy.⁴ As Schmidt says, “[in Pauline churches] there may have been very few who were poor by first-century standards.”⁵ But this view was disputed by J. Justin Meggitt in 1998. For him, the “Pauline Christians *en masse* shared fully the bleak material existence which was the lot of more than 99 percent of the inhabitants of the Empire.”⁶ The skilled artisans, although being relatively wealthy among the common people, struggled daily to earn enough to avoid starvation.⁷ All free workers, both skilled and unskilled, lived in constant fear of unemployment.⁸

Meggitt’s proposal generated robust responses from Dale Martin and Gerd Theissen.⁹ But although Martin is very critical of Meggitt, he agrees that it is misleading to speak of a “middle class” in the Roman world.¹⁰ Likewise, Theissen agrees that undoubtedly “the majority of the Christians were common and low people.”¹¹ As the debate continues, it has become fairly

is by no means comprehensive. Space limitations prevent us from entering into the complexity of the issues. The goal of the survey below is to provide an overall description that is generally accepted, with sufficient details to paint a picture of the “audience” for our later analysis. See Morley, “The Poor,” 21–39, for a good discussion on poverty in Rome.

4. It should be noted that urban poverty was more severe than poverty in rural poverty. In fact, urbanization and poverty went hand in hand. See Morley, “The Poor,” 37–38.

5. Schmidt, “Riches and Poverty,” 827. This is set in contrast to Deissmann, *Ancient East*, 144, 246–7, who believed that the earliest Pauline churches consisted of people primarily from the lower classes. The most significant work on this matter is that of Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 51–73. More recent discussions on the social and economic life of early Christians can be found in Still and Horrell, *After the First Christians*; Longenecker and Liebengood, *Engaging Economics*.

6. Meggitt, *Paul*, 99.

7. *Ibid.*, 54–55.

8. *Ibid.*, *Paul*, 58.

9. See Martin, “Review Essay,” 51–64; Theissen, “Social Structure,” 65–84, and Meggitt’s response in Meggitt, “Responses,” 85–94. See also Theissen, “Social Conflicts,” 371–91.

10. Martin, “Review,” 53. By “middle class” here, I refer to the meaning of the term in the West today.

11. Theissen, “Social Structure,” 75.

clear that while earlier scholars such as Meeks are certainly right that “a Pauline congregation generally reflected a fair cross-section of urban society,”¹² Meggitt’s research serves as a strong reminder that the majority of that society lived at or below subsistence level (the minimum economic level required to sustain life). At the same time, Longenecker rightly points out that the deficiency of Meggitt’s economic model is its binary nature, with the tendency to draw a sharp distinction between the elite and non-elite.¹³ It is true that this distinction is embedded in the rhetoric of Greco-Roman literature, which “served elite purposes to relegate all who were not among the elite to the category of ‘the poor’ indiscriminately.”¹⁴ But it should not blind us to the fact that a broad economic spectrum existed among the first hearers of Romans. Recently Friesen and Longenecker have provided us with very informative economic profiles, using social and historical data from various sources.¹⁵ The profiles they have derived are fairly similar. The table below is a summary of Longenecker’s model,¹⁶ which is more conservative than Friesen’s in terms of the percentage of people living in poverty.¹⁷

12. Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 73.

13. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 40–44.

14. Ibid., 43. Cf. Morley, “The Poor,” 29. As Aelius Aristides says, “the existence of inferiors is an advantage to superiors since they will be able to point out those over whom they are superior.” (*Or.* 24.34; cited by Longenecker).

15. Friesen, “Poverty,” 340–47; Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 295–6. The economic modeling used is admittedly beyond my skill. But there is no need to attain absolute accuracy here. For our purposes, the main question is *roughly* what proportion of the audience lived at subsistence level or below. It should be noted that while Welborn, review of *Remember the Poor*, is critical of Longenecker’s failure to see Paul’s deconstruction of Roman social relations and his intention to transform the class system of Roman society, he does not seem to specifically raise issues with Longenecker’s economic profile.

16. Information extracted from Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 294–6. Note that both Longenecker and Friesen say that the figures are rough estimates.

17. See *ibid.*, 53, for a comparison. For instance, Friesen’s figure for those living at or below subsistence level is 68 percent for the *general population*, compared with Longenecker’s 55 percent. I have chosen Longenecker’s profile to show that even a more conservative model demonstrates that the majority of the audience were quite poor.

Economic scale (ES)	ES1–ES3	ES4	ES5	ES6–ES7
Description of economic scale(s)	Excess economic security (The elite)	Not without economic risks, but with significant level of economic security	Minimal economic resources	Subsistence-level existence
Percentages within population	3%	15%	27%	55% (30% ES6; 25% ES7)
Percentages for an urban Jesus-group	0%	10%	25%	65% (35% ES6; 30% ES7)
Numbers in this urban Jesus-group (Out of 50 people)	0	5	12	33
Composition of members of the group (number of persons)		An ES4 family of four—which comprises the heart of this household group (4) An artisan (1)	Two ES5 families (9) Two artisans (2) One ES5 merchant (1)	Four family-groups border on subsistence level, usually managing to survive but occasionally dropping precariously below survival standards (18) Three servants in the ES4 family (3) Two servants in the ES5 families (2) Ten at subsistence level existence or below, unprotected from household structures—some could be destitute (10)

According to this model, roughly 65 percent of Paul's audience in Rome lived at or below subsistence level. Just under half of these (30 percent) would be struggling significantly, and they included the unskilled day laborers, widows, orphans, or people with a disability. About 25 percent would have some minimal economic resources, but they "would clearly have been conscious of their economic vulnerability and their proximity to poverty."¹⁸ Within this group there would be some artisans and merchants. Roughly 10 percent would have a moderate surplus, although "not without economic risk."¹⁹ Although these figures are not beyond dispute, it is safe to assume that the majority of people in the Christ-community in Rome were subject to economic risks, with possibly more than half of them living at or below subsistence level.²⁰

In a study independent from the economic profiling of Bruce Longenecker and Steven Friesen,²¹ Peter Oakes provides a profile of a model craft-worker house church in Rome. Oakes' approach differs from those of Longenecker and Friesen in that it is a social model, rather than an economic one. Here is the profile provided by Oakes.²²

Oakes' social description of the model craft-worker house church in Rome (30 people)
A craft-worker who rented a fairly large workshop
His wife, children, a couple of (male) craft-working slaves, a (female) domestic slave, a dependent relative
A few other householders
Their spouses, children, slaves, and other dependents
A couple of members of families whose householder was not part of the house church
A couple of slaves whose owners were not part of the house church
A couple of free or freed dependents of people who were not part of the house church
A couple of homeless people
A few people who were renting space in shared rooms (e.g. migrant workers separated from their families)

18. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 55.

19. *Ibid.*, 295.

20. The accuracy of the figures suggested by Friesen and Longenecker—and indeed their methodologies—will be debated, but the point is that a high proportion of the house church members in Rome had to live with some form of economic hardship and/or vulnerability. See also Appendix B for a brief discussion of the social location of certain people listed in Rom 16.

21. Friesen, "Poverty," 340–47; Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 295–6.

22. Oakes, *Reading*, 96. Oakes' significant contribution is his space-distribution modeling using archaeological data in Pompeii. It is beyond our scope to compare and contrast different methodologies for socioeconomic analysis. But see Oakes, "Methodological Issues," 9–36, for a detailed discussion.

It is noteworthy that the makeup of this profile bears some resemblance to Longenecker's profile. The craft-worker and other householders would have a moderate surplus. A few others would have reasonable resources to make ends meet (e.g., some householders).²³ Others, including skilled and unskilled workers, widows, and beggars, lived at or below subsistence level, with various degrees of vulnerability. Although it would be unwise to translate this social profile into an economic one, it does support the view that a high proportion of Paul's audience suffered from socioeconomic hardship in some way.

Living Condition, Sickness, Life Expectancy, and Hunger

As mentioned above, economic life and social reality in ancient Rome were inseparable. It will, therefore, be helpful to consider briefly the daily experiences of people living in Rome, so as to better appreciate what subsistence-level living meant in practice.

According to Jeffers, the wealth of ancient Rome was not surpassed by the Western world until the 1800s.²⁴ There were massive public buildings with marble facades. Huge temples portrayed the greatness of Rome's gods. There were hundreds of private homes on the hills of the city.²⁵ In contrast, Rome's poorer residents often lived in the upper floors of multi-story apartment blocks (*insulae*),²⁶ or small ground-floor domiciles at the rear of the shops (*tabernae*).²⁷

It is believed that "[t]he rooms [of an apartment] were small, damp, dark and cold, except in summer, when they were hot and stuffy. Privacy was virtually impossible, and the sounds of the city often made a good

23. It should be noted that householders who owned slaves would not necessarily have financial security, for slave ownership did not mean economic prosperity. Poor free and freed people could have slaves working in their businesses. See Watson, "Roman," 1002. Cf. Rodgers, *Roman World*, 226; Jeffers, *Greco-Roman*, 221, 223.

24. Jeffers, *Greco-Roman*, 59.

25. Ibid., 59. See also Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* 28.3. Building structures remaining today include Aqua Claudia, Aqua Anio Novus, the Theatre of Marcellus, and the Temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus. (Unless otherwise stated, references to Greek and Latin classical works follow the translations in the Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.)

26. Jewett, *Romans*, 53. The wealthy also lived in the lower floors of these buildings in the better parts of the city.

27. See *ibid.*, 53–55, for a detailed analysis. Jewett uses the term "tenement" to refer to the apartment blocks in Rome. But Oakes, *Reading*, 91, is somewhat wary of the term, for it seems to connote "a fairly uniformly shabby block of consistently poor housing." First-century apartment blocks were typically more diverse.

night's sleep difficult . . . Living behind the shops was no better . . ."²⁸ According to one estimate, the population density was three hundred per acre in the residential areas of Rome, which is more than twice that of twentieth-century Calcutta.²⁹ The overcrowded and unhygienic conditions probably contributed to the plagues that swept through Rome regularly.³⁰ The poorest had no housing at all and had to sleep in the open air.³¹

Such poor living conditions and the lack of modern medicine help to explain why the average life expectancy is estimated to have been between twenty to thirty years of age. Infant mortality rates were high,³² with possibly a quarter of children not surviving the first year of life.³³ Life was indeed full of sorrow for the urban poor in Rome.³⁴ Hunger was either a constant fear or reality for them. Food crises were common in the Mediterranean region.³⁵ About 150,000 adult males in Rome received the monthly grain dole (*frumentatio*). But it should be noted that women, children, slaves, non-citizens and the most recently arrived citizens were excluded from the dole. This demonstrates the immense poverty faced by the inhabitants of Rome.³⁶

28. Jeffers, *Greco-Roman*, 59–60. Cf. Rodgers, *Roman World*, 88. See also the vivid description by the satirical poet, Juvenal, *Sat.* 3.190–211.

29. Jewett, *Romans*, 54; cf. Meggitt, *Paul*, 71n174.

30. Jewett, *Romans*, 54; cf. Meggitt, *Paul*, 71. Meggitt provides examples of the sanitary conditions of urban life. In a collection of jokes dating about 200 BCE, there is a notice put up by someone just moved into a new house that says, "ANYONE WHO DUMPS EXCREMENT HERE WILL NOT GET IT BACK" (*Philogelos* 85; cited by Meggitt). And Juvenal, *Sat.* 1.131, warns people against urinating at the image of a great man.

31. *Ibid.*, 63.

32. Obviously high infant mortality rate and short average life expectancies are interrelated.

33. Those who survived childhood diseases and lived beyond age ten could expect to live for another thirty-five to forty years on average. See Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 138.

34. This is especially so for the poorest of the poor, since "the state did not provide for the needs of the aged, widows, orphans, the disabled or the sick," as Jeffers, *Greco-Roman*, 189, notes. Cf. Meggitt, *Paul*, 67–73.

35. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 100.

36. Meggitt, *Paul*, 51–52. It should be noted that the dole might not reduce the number of poor, and it might in fact attract more poor migrants. See Morley, "The poor," 39.

Social Divisions and Injustice

Ancient society was intensely hierarchical. This social structure ensured that the poor remained poor. Indeed, it would have exacerbated their poverty. A brief look at the social framework will help us understand the social injustice people experienced in Rome.

Social divisions in the Empire were maintained by the legal and coercive power of the state.³⁷ Apart from the imperial family, the upper class consisted of three orders *ordo senatorius* (senators), *ordo equester* (equestrians of Rome) and *decurions* (provincial aristocracy). These were the small minority in the population. At the top of the rest of the social hierarchy were owners of small businesses and artisans, such as bakers, butchers, dyers, and tanners.³⁸ They probably belonged to ES4 or ES5 in the economic scale above.³⁹ Then there were the “free poor,” who were freeborn Romans. Probably about one third of Rome’s population belonged to this category.⁴⁰ They might be socially better off than the non-Romans, but economically they were often poor. Then there were ex-slaves and slaves.⁴¹

“Roman society was obsessed with status and rank,” according to Garnsey and Saller. “[A] Roman’s place in the social hierarchy was advertised in the clothes he wore, the seat he occupied at public entertainments. . . . There were significant status variations within the same ranks at all levels.”⁴² Social interactions took place through the traditional patron-client relationships. The patron owed the client protection, while the client owed the patron respect and honor. This type of reciprocal relationship displayed the superiority of the elite over the common people.⁴³ A patron’s social status was measured by the quantity and status of their clients.⁴⁴ For example, clients showed honor to their patrons by forming crowds at their doors for

37. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 199. We will discuss Rome’s coercive power further below.

38. By no means did they form a “middle class” (as we know it today), however, because the gulf between their living standard and that of the upper class was so great. See Watson, “Roman,” 1001.

39. Cf. Meggitt, *Paul*, 54–55.

40. Watson, “Roman,” 1001.

41. *Ibid.*, 1001.

42. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 199. Even among the slaves there were differences in terms of their occupations and economic resources.

43. The patron-client relationship did not necessarily lead to exploitation, but often did.

44. Jeffers, *Greco-Roman*, 192. Cf. Walker, “Benefactor,” 157.

the morning *salutatio*.⁴⁵ In return, they could expect small food hand-outs or invitations to dinner.⁴⁶

Cicero thought that the work of the artisan was vulgar, and that nothing was noble about a workshop.⁴⁷ The elite saw poverty as “ugly and dishonorable.”⁴⁸ It is with this ideological and social mindset (together with the network of personal relations between the imperial family and the elite) that the Empire maintained the political and economic gulf between the upper class and the common people.⁴⁹

The above not only illustrates the highly hierarchical nature of society in Rome, but also the fact that socioeconomic hardship was reinforced and exacerbated by the social attitudes and systems embedded in the fabric of society. Even though the socioeconomically inferior may not have been exploited directly, the social structure ensured that they remained relatively powerless and vulnerable to abuse. Roman residents might have considered these realities as social norms, but they nevertheless experienced harsh living conditions on a daily basis.

It should be noted that believers in Rome almost certainly shared similar social backgrounds with the general population. Using Rom 16 as the main source data, Lampe proposes that Paul’s audience in Rome shared a similar social profile with that of the rest of society.⁵⁰ As Jeffers argues, as with other non-Romans, “they were confronted constantly with the differences between themselves and the Roman elite in terms of language, education, wealth, power, and honor.”⁵¹ Thus, Christ-followers would have experienced the same social divisions and injustice as other residents in Rome.

45. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 151.

46. Ibid., 151 The grain dole in Rome was probably the result of benefactions of patrons. See Walker, “Benefactor,” 158.

47. *Off.* 1.42. Cicero continues to say that “all mechanics are engaged in vulgar trades . . . Least respectable of all are those trades which cater for sensual pleasures: ‘Fishmongers, butchers, cooks, and poulterers . . .’”

48. Jeffers, *Greco-Roman*, 193. MacMullen, *Roman*, 119, cites a Pompeiian inscription that says, “*I hate poor people. If anyone wants something for nothing, he’s a fool. Let him pay up and he’ll get it.*” (*CIL* 4.9839b)

49. Horsley, *Imperial Order*, 16. Another good example of social division is gender inequality. See Appendix B for details.

50. Lampe, “Romans 16,” 227–29. Lampe also thinks that Rom 16 implies a high proportion of immigrants in the Roman church (227).

51. Jeffers, *Conflicts*, 9.

Foreigners, War-Captives, and the Jews

Rome was a multicultural society, with plenty of ethnic tension. But the associated social injustice was complex and not restricted to racial discrimination. These tensions and injustices exacerbated the sorrow and pain experienced by the socioeconomically poor.

In Paul's day foreigners and their descendants made up a significant part of the Roman population. Many resident foreigners came involuntarily from the East as prisoners of war, and would, as a result, possess the lowest legal status.⁵² Indeed, Romans were known to have killed and enslaved tens of thousands of war-captives in their military campaigns.⁵³ Some of the slaves might be able to gain citizenship later in life. But since they were of non-Roman stock, they would still have a lower social status than that of freeborn Romans.⁵⁴ At any rate, foreign residents in Rome experienced racial discrimination. Africans were reportedly despised, and even Greeks received slurs.⁵⁵

Jews comprised one of the larger ethnic groups in Rome, with about 15,000–60,000 of them in Paul's day.⁵⁶ Given the fact that some synagogues were located in the more economically depressed areas, not a few of them would be quite poor.⁵⁷ Many would have come from Jerusalem, as a result of the sieges by Pompey (63 BCE) and Sosius (37 BCE). Sources indicate that a significant number were expelled from Rome under Tiberius (c. 19 CE).⁵⁸ Many would have been deported after the Edict of Claudius (49 CE). This included Prisca and Aquila (Acts 18:1–3), who returned to Rome later, probably after the Edict lapsed in 54 CE. Even though the Romans granted the Jews special rights (such as permission to meet in synagogues and to live according to their own customs), like other foreigners they were not respected by most of the Roman elite. For example, Cicero called Judaism

52. Note that free persons outside Rome were allowed to relocate to the capital city, and they brought their means of livelihood with them. But they were often discouraged by the lack of employment due to the abundance of free slave labor. See Jeffers, *Conflicts*, 7.

53. See Joshel, *Slavery*, 55. Appendix B provides further information regarding the number of people killed or enslaved by Rome.

54. Jeffers, *Conflicts*, 6–8.

55. Edwards, "Rome," 1014. See Cicero, *Tusc.* 2.65, and *De Or.* 1.105, regarding contempt for Greeks, and Livy, *Hist* 20:12.18, regarding Africans.

56. Jewett, *Romans*, 55. Jeffers, *Conflicts*, 10, thinks that forty to fifty thousand Jews lived in Rome. Again, the exact figure is debatable, but the point is that there were many of them.

57. See Appendix B for a discussion on the economic situation of the Jews in Rome.

58. Jeffers, *Conflicts*, 10.

“a barbarous superstition.”⁵⁹ Thus, although some Jews like Prisca and Aquila might have enjoyed a level of economic stability (because they were artisans), they would have suffered from other forms of discrimination that foreigners in Rome typically experienced.⁶⁰

In sum, there were many foreigners in Rome, particularly war-captives and their descendants.⁶¹ Often they were economically poor and suffered from various forms of social injustice. The economic hardship and oppression experienced by many Jews is a good example of the harsh living conditions many foreigners endured in Rome.

Slaves

The plight of slaves is very important for our inquiry. The foregoing discussion already implies that many inhabitants of Rome were slaves or of slave origin.⁶² In fact, the Greco-Roman slave system was an integral part of every aspect of life,⁶³ and the economy depended on it. Byron provides an excellent summary of the debates around slavery in recent decades.⁶⁴ For some time “scholars tended to portray slavery in the Greco-Roman world as a benign form of mass employment for the under classes as well as an effective means of integrating foreigners.”⁶⁵ But the reality is that slavery was a relationship of domination, and an example of “the powerful exploiting the powerless.”⁶⁶

Archaeologists have unearthed objects relating to slavery, “such as the Roman whip (*flagellum*) whose thongs had pieces of metal attached to them

59. Ibid., 10. See also Cicero, *Flac.*, 66–69, and Edwards, “Rome,” 1014.

60. Their deportation from Rome following the Edict of Claudius is an example of that discrimination. Forman, *Politics*, 124, thinks that it “is possible that the Jewish exiles returning to Rome (after the ban had lapsed) had previously suffered the confiscation of their property and now faced restrictions on gathering together, homelessness, and the difficulty of obtaining kosher food.”

61. Of course, there were migrants who went to Rome voluntarily. See, e.g., Morley, “The Poor,” 37, 39.

62. There are diverse views regarding the number of slaves in Rome. For our purposes, it is safe to assume that about 25 to 40 percent of Rome’s population consisted of slaves. See discussion in Appendix B.

63. Rupprecht, “Slave,” 881; Rodgers, *Roman World*, 224–27; Jeffers, *Greco-Roman*, 221–26.

64. Byron, “Background,” 116–39. See also Byron, *Recent Research*, 1–35.

65. Byron, “Background,” 116. This view will be disputed below. See Appendix B for further information against this view.

66. Ibid., 133.

in order to make deep wounds into the flesh.”⁶⁷ It is true that Roman law removed the owners’ right of life and death over their slaves, regulated the punitive sale of slaves, and prohibited the use of private prisons in which slaves were kept in chains. But the law also classified slaves as chattels and a “speaking tool” (*instrumentum vocale*) that could be bought, sold and punished by their masters at will.⁶⁸ Moreover, as Jennifer Glancy points out, “Sexual access to slave bodies was a pervasive dimension of ancient systems of slavery. Both female and male slaves were available for their owners’ pleasure.”⁶⁹ Sexual use of female and young male slaves was widespread.⁷⁰ In light of this, one can hardly say that slavery was a benign form of mass employment.⁷¹ Two further aspects of the Roman slavery system should be mentioned.

First, the practice of self-sale. It has been suggested that some sold themselves into slavery in order to relieve themselves from debts or seek improvement of quality of life. However, only rare cases of self-sale can be found in ancient sources.⁷² Also, “[r]eferences to self-sale in the Roman jurists indicate that individuals who sold themselves into slavery had not only given up their inalienable right to freedom, but also brought shame upon themselves and their family.”⁷³ Slavery was not an attractive option.

Second, the claimed possibility of upward mobility.⁷⁴ It is suggested that the socioeconomic prospect of some slaves and ex-slaves were better than the poor freeborn.⁷⁵ This is because in some cases a favored slave gained from wealthy masters the training and even sufficient capital to engage in commerce and manufacture upon manumission. This generalized prospect of upward mobility has, however, been challenged. It is true that

67. Harrill, “Slavery,” 1125. Cf. Cohick, 260.

68. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 116.

69. Glancy, *Slavery*, 21. See also Cohick, *Women*, 268.

70. Glancy, *Slavery*, 23.

71. It should be noted, however, that not every slave was brutalized, and some slaves in the urban setting received better treatment. (See Byron, “Background,” 133.) In fact, it was to the masters’ advantage that they take care of their slaves’ physical needs because they were a financial investment for them. It would be fair to say that the slave system provided some form of protection for the enslaved at least in some instances. Byron concludes that “not all forms of slavery were considered to be undesirable. But the vast majority of them probably were” (134; *Emphasis added*).

72. Byron, “Background,” 134.

73. *Ibid.*, 134. See also Glancy, *Slavery*, 80–85, against Bartchy, “Slave,” 1099.

74. See, e.g., Martin, *Slavery as Salvation*, 30–42.

75. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 124.

a few manumitted slaves enjoyed upward mobility.⁷⁶ There were also imperial slaves and freedmen who held considerable power, such as members of *familia Caesaris*, and the Roman procurator of Judea, Felix, who was an imperial freedman of Claudius (Acts 24:22–27).⁷⁷ But it is likely that this represented the exception, not the norm.⁷⁸ Most likely the majority of slaves were not upwardly mobile. It should also be noted that the ruling class took measures to prevent the upward mobility of slaves. Freed slaves were legally obliged to provide services to their former masters, as long as they were able to earn their own living at the same time.⁷⁹

In light of the above, Garnsey and Saller's comment remains valid: "The psychological oppression associated with lack of freedom, the threat of the whip, of the break-up of slave families and of sexual abuse, continued unabated."⁸⁰ This sums up the daily reality of life as a slave in Rome.

Given the large number of slaves in the population, it is almost certain that there were slaves within Roman house churches, and that everyone would have regular interactions with them. For example, in his model craft-worker house church (see above), Oakes considers that there were roughly six to seven slaves out of a thirty-member gathering (20–23 percent).⁸¹ It is likely that slaves in the house churches experienced the same social realities that characterized the lives of other slaves in Rome. According to Oakes's model, there were a number of slaves who did not belong to the householders within the house church, and it is probable that their owners were not Christ-followers. We can assume that their daily sufferings would be similar to that which has been described above. We would hope that the slaves owned by members of the Christ-community would have received better treatment (but they appear to have remained enslaved, Paul's exhortations in Philemon notwithstanding). Yet we must also bear in mind that there may have been discrepancies between what believing masters were encouraged to do and what they actually did, especially when the slaver-owners

76. Harrill, "Slavery," 1126. For example, the Latin poet, Horace, was born to a freedman.

77. Ibid., 1126. Bartchy, "Slave, Slavery," 1099.

78. See Byron, "Background," 121, 135. As Horsley, "Slave Systems," 57, says, "The experience of the vast majority of slaves cannot be mitigated by focusing on the unusual influence or atypical mobility of a 'select few.'"

79. Jeffers, *Greco-Roman*, 232, who summarizes their ongoing obligations this way: "They owed continued reverence, duties and payments to their former masters. The senate considered requiring freedmen to wear a special uniform so any dodging of duty would be noticed" (233).

80. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 116.

81. Oakes, *Reading*, 96.

were new converts. At any rate, many slaves were familiar with hardship and injustice, both in their past and present experiences.

SOCIO-POLITICAL INJUSTICE AND ROMAN IMPERIAL ORDER

As mentioned before, politics, religion, social and economic systems and structures were intertwined in the ancient world. We have already seen how social and economic realities are linked. But a closer look reveals that they are also connected with Roman political structures. Here we will highlight those connections by briefly looking at socio-political injustice in Rome and the Roman imperial order, especially in terms of how those in positions of power used social and political systems to exploit others.

Although imperial oppression was not the only reason why people suffered, the repression and cruelty of the Empire would contribute to or increase the suffering of the common people. Food shortages, for instance, were a consequence of a famine, yet often (as mentioned above) the poor suffered much more because of the uneven distribution of available food in favor of the ruling class. The Roman system of property acquisition and transmission ensured social and economic inequality. The Roman law of property rights favored Roman citizens. In an economy that depended on agriculture, the Roman system ensured that the elite maintained their socio-economic superiority and the poor stayed poor. As Garnsey and Saller say, “The direct exploitation of labor by rich proprietors was a central feature of Roman imperial society . . . Wealth was generated for members of the propertied class to a large extent by the labor of their personal dependents.”⁸² The patronage system of relationships was Rome’s way of maintaining public order and control over its subject people.⁸³ This system took advantage of the “honor and shame” social convention to ensure that the imperial family and the elite were at the top of the social pyramid.⁸⁴

Public rhetoric was an important way by which the Roman imperial order maintained control. Roman rhetoric assumed the function of legitimizing slavery and the suppression of women’s social status, in accordance

82. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 110–11. More examples of Roman economic exploitation can be found in Elliott and Reasoner, *Documents*, 163–71.

83. Horsley, *Imperial Order*, 14–16.

84. See Malina, *New Testament World*, 27–57, about the honor-and-shame society of the ancient world. But note the warning of Crook, “Honor,” 592–611, against a binary view of honor and shame.

with the interests of the slaveholding and patriarchal upper classes.⁸⁵ Public speeches were often delivered by figures of power. A common theme in the oratory of the Empire concerned the peace established by Caesar throughout the whole world.⁸⁶ The reality, of course, was that the *pax Romana* was possible only because of imperial conquests and oppression. Perhaps the most overt form of oppression carried out by imperial Rome was their military brutality. As mentioned, there were numerous war-captives and their descendants in Rome. Imperial triumph was the cause of their subjugation, loss of property, loss of dignity, geographical displacement, slavery, and degradation.⁸⁷

Political oppression and socioeconomic injustice were, therefore, interconnected. The Roman imperial order ensured that the social and economic systems worked in favor of those in positions of socioeconomic and political power.

Imperial Cult and Caesar the Chief Benefactor

As mentioned, in the ancient world religion and politics were inseparable. Pharaoh was perceived as the true offspring of the sun god, Re, and his kingship was secured by this divine attribute.⁸⁸ We find a similar kind of divine rulership developing in the Roman Empire.

The Caesars' claims to divinely sanctioned rule vary, and are best demonstrated by the terminology used concerning their reigns. In Rome the Julio-Claudian emperors did not receive explicit divine honors until after their deaths. But, as Wright says, "being hailed as the son of the newly deified Julius was an important part of Augustus's profile, and that of his successors."⁸⁹ Therefore it is not surprising that the title "son of the deified" was inscribed on Roman coins.⁹⁰ In the *Res Gestae* (34), the emperor says that he has exceeded everyone else in power after the legal recognition given to him by the senate and the people of Rome because of his achievements.⁹¹ As the chief benefactor of the Empire, Caesar deserved the *fides* (loyalty,

85. Horsley, *Imperial Order*, 17–18.

86. That is, the Empire provided security against external attack. See *ibid.*, 18.

87. *Ibid.*, 11–14.

88. Strawn, "Pharaoh," 633.

89. Wright, "Paul and Caesar," 175; Wright, *Resurrection*, 56–57.

90. See Elliott and Reasoner, *Documents*, 141–45, for records of the deification of successive Caesars in ancient documents.

91. Cf. Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 15.

faithfulness to treaty obligations) of its people because of his *auctoritas*.⁹² One of the four personal and moral qualities attributed to Augustus in *Res Gestae* 34 is justice (*iustitiae*).⁹³ According to Wright, “Rome claimed to have brought justice to the world; indeed, the goddess *Iustitia* was an Augustan innovation, closely associated with the principate.”⁹⁴ All these were designed to support the claim that Caesar’s rule enjoyed the blessing of the gods.

The imperial cult was an expression of the Roman subjects’ loyalty to the emperor, since his gifts matched those of the gods.⁹⁵ In many Greek cities Augustus and his successors were “compared to and made into a god among traditional gods.”⁹⁶ Not only was the emperor an object of veneration, he was also the chief priest of the Roman world, *pontifex maximus*. Coins often featured the portrait of Caesar with titles like *divi filius* and *pontifex maximus*.⁹⁷ The imperial cult also included a cult for Rome itself. Augustus refused to have any temple consecrated to himself unless it was done in tandem with the goddess *Roma*. The ideology behind this claimed is that “Rome was chosen by the gods to rule the world” and lead them to a Golden Age.⁹⁸ According to deSilva, “Rome’s power meant order and security, and the cult of the *Augusti et Roma* became an important expression of loyalty to that sheltering power.”⁹⁹

Were followers of Jesus in danger of religious persecution? We know of no widespread persecution in Rome at the time Paul wrote the letter. But we should not see “religious persecution” in modern terms, for in the ancient world religion and socio-religious realities were inseparable. Believers’ non-participation in pagan festivals would put them in danger of persecution, or

92. Georgi, “Upside Down,” 149; Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 15. The term *auctoritas* refers to the general prestige and influence of a person.

93. The four attributes are courage, clemency, justice and devotion. See also Georgi, “Upside Down,” 149.

94. Wright, “Paul and Caesar,” 176; See also Georgi, “Upside Down,” 149, for a similar view.

95. deSilva, “Ruler Cult,” 1026; Rodgers, *Roman World*, 172–3. Cf. Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 195.

96. Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 20.

97. deSilva, “Ruler Cult,” 1027. Cf. Rodgers, *Roman World*, 172–3; Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 194–5.

98. deSilva, “Ruler Cult,” 1027. Cf. Rodgers, *Roman World*, 172.

99. deSilva, “Ruler Cult,” 1027–8. Also, in Italy the imperial cult took the shape of the traditional religion of the *genius* (the guardian spirit of the head of the household). In Rome, rites were offered in private homes to Augustus’ *genius*. Thus, through the cult Caesar’s reign was the power behind Roman peace and stability. For another good discussion on the imperial cult and Rome, see Jackson, *New Creation*, 68–71.

at least social isolation.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, Elliott and Reasoner list fifteen instances of religious intolerance in Rome, from the prohibition of certain sacrificial rites in 429 BCE to the (first) executions of Christians in 64 CE, with actions against Judaism in recent memory (19, 41, 49 CE).¹⁰¹ In light of this, Christ-followers had reason to be concerned. It is argued that actions against “foreign” religions were due to Rome’s suspicion of any social-religious practices that might engender civic disorder. This is especially the case when a “foreign” religion was perceived “as especially attracting slaves and women.”¹⁰²

In short, the allegedly divinely sanctioned rule of the Caesars provided legitimacy for imperial rule and its associated oppression by taking advantage of the patronage system and the social convention of honor and shame. This religio-political system ensured the socioeconomic hardship experienced by the audience of Romans would remain and there was little they could do to overturn the injustice embedded in the system. Importantly, since the gods were thought to be involved in this system, it would be perceived by the ancients that cosmic powers were ultimately behind the power and authority of Rome. As a result, socioeconomic hardship and socio-political injustice would also be understood as connected to the cosmic forces that supported the system. This may come as a surprise to moderns, but it would have appeared as an obvious reality in the ancient world.

THE “AUDIENCE” IN OUR EXEGESIS

The above survey has painted a picture of the daily realities faced by members of the house churches in Rome, and provides the necessary socio-historical background for our exegesis. In particular, the portrayal of the interconnections between socioeconomic and religio-political realities will be crucial to our analysis. But the goal of our socio-historical analysis is also to describe a plausible audience in our exegesis. In Chapter 1 we mentioned that at the most basic level the “audience” in our exegesis consists of all those who were familiar with suffering in Rome. In this chapter we have established that within the first-century house churches the majority of the members would be familiar with socioeconomic hardship and religio-political

100. Commenting on early Christianity in general, Green, *1 Peter*, 9, says, “Failing to associate themselves with these religiocultural activities, their behaviors would have been perceived by the general populace as atheistic . . . they would have been charged with bringing upon their communities the disfavor of the gods.”

101. Elliott and Reasoner, *Documents*, 280, document resources for all fifteen instances. For ancient documents regarding troubles experienced by the Jews from the time of Claudius, see pages 206–18.

102. *Ibid.*, 279.

injustice, or at least they regularly interacted with people who experienced hardship. In light of this, we can say that the “audience” consisted of those who understood what it meant to live at or below subsistence level; people who experienced poor living conditions; families who were familiar with high infant mortality rates; foreigners who were involuntarily relocated because of Roman conquests; and those who were enslaved. Indeed, some members of the “audience” may have been destitute, if they happened to be beggars, the chronically sick, or homeless.¹⁰³ We will refer to this audience throughout our exegesis, and ask how they would have understood the letter’s argument and its references to suffering.

With this audience in mind, we can then ask the relevant questions during our exegesis. For example, how would those living below subsistence level in the audience understand the term *θλιψις* in Rom 5:3; 8:35? What would the terms *λιμός* and *γυμνότης* in 8:35 mean to the beggars and the destitute? What does the notion of a hope of glory in 5:2–3 mean to the slaves in the audience, given the fact that their social status and daily existence were less than glorious and honorable?

ANCIENT WORLDVIEWS ON SUFFERING

Before moving on to the text of Romans, an outline of some relevant aspects of the ancient worldviews on suffering is needed. This is a vast subject, and much can be said about it.¹⁰⁴ What constitutes suffering? What are the causes? What is the purpose of suffering, if there is one? How should people deal with it, and what should their attitude be? Can one prevent it? Is there value in suffering? If so, what is it? But space limitations disallow us from undertaking a comprehensive study here. Since our interest lies in how the audience would have *interacted with the text of Rom 5–8*, we will specifically survey aspects of Greco-Roman and Jewish worldviews that are relevant to our exegesis.

Educative, Training, and Disciplinary Values

Both Greco-Roman and Jewish writings share the view that suffering has educative value.¹⁰⁵ In his detailed study, Croy asserts that the “view that suf-

103. In Oakes’ model craft-worker house church of thirty people, there are a couple of homeless people. See Oakes, *Reading*, 96.

104. See Talbert, *Learning*, 9–23; Croy, *Endurance*, 77–161; Fredrickson, “Paul,” 172–8; Smith, *Seven Explanations*, 9–200; Fitzgerald, *Cracks*, 47–116.

105. See Fredrickson, “Paul,” 175–76; Talbert, *Learning*, 9–21; Smith, *Seven*

fering was salutary or educational was widespread among Greek writers from the mid-fifth century on.”¹⁰⁶ In fact, the Tragedy genre seeks to educate people to develop their capacity to endure hardship.¹⁰⁷ In a letter to his enemy, Pompey, Julius Caesar says that they should consider that the losses both sides have already sustained should serve as lessons and cautions, and that both should consider laying down their arms.¹⁰⁸ The educative value of suffering is often spoken of among Stoic philosophers. Seneca thinks that those who suffer from great misfortunes will eventually be toughened.¹⁰⁹ Epictetus also thinks that pain and suffering lead to moral improvement.¹¹⁰ Croy summarizes this Greco-Roman perspective on suffering as follows,¹¹¹

Whatever its origin, suffering was a “given” in human affairs, and its potential for benefitting the sufferer was axiomatic for several Greco-Roman authors. Stoics of a later period (most notably Seneca) saw in suffering the means by which the gods exercised, tested and trained persons.¹¹²

Jewish writings also speak of the training and disciplinary value of suffering.¹¹³ In the midst of severe affliction, the author of Lamentations says, “Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord” (3:40).¹¹⁴ Likewise, Eliphaz says to Job, “How happy is the one whom God reproves; therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty”¹¹⁵ (Job 5:17). Elsewhere it is said that God tests the righteous through suffering so that they may be found worthy (Wis 3:4–5). Jubilees 17:17 looks at the testing of Abraham in Gen 22 and says that the patriarch is faithful in all his afflictions.¹¹⁶ The author of *Psalms of Solomon* says that, in the process of God’s testing, the righteous are required to endure so that they may be shown mercy (*Ps. Sol.* 16:14–15). Sometimes sickness is seen as an instrument through which

Explanations, 59–78; Croy, *Endurance*, 139–56.

106. *Ibid.*, 139.

107. *Ibid.*, 141–42.

108. *Bell. Civ.* 3.10.

109. *Helv.* 2.3.

110. See Fredrickson, “Paul,” 175.

111. Of course, there are those who see that pain should be avoided. The Epicureans think that emotional pain should be avoided, because their goal is tranquility and grief is the opposite of that. See Fredrickson, “Paul,” 174.

112. Croy, *Endurance*, 157.

113. See, e.g., Smith, *Seven Explanations*, 59–78, 134–39.

114. NRSV.

115. NRSV. Cf. *Ps* 84:12.

116. Cf. Smith, *Seven Explanations*, 135.

people can turn from wickedness (Sir 38:9–10), and in the case of Tobit, an angel said that he was sent to test him and heal him (Tob 12:13–14). Thus, suffering is seen as God's way of testing his people so that they may be approved by him.¹¹⁷ It has educative and training value. It is likely that Rom 5:3–4 reflects this educative value, for Paul says that affliction produces perseverance and character. We will discuss this further in our exegesis.

Retributive Justice

Suffering is very often understood to be retributive or punitive. That is, it is the result of the punishment of the deities, and actions need to be taken to avert their wrath. In the ancient world people believed that the gods punished humans when they were offended, or when not enough was done to please them. This was common within the Greco-Roman worldview. The gods either caused human suffering when they were offended, or prayers and offerings had to be made to them for deliverance from calamities. The earthquake at Sparta in 464 BCE, for example, was thought to be caused by an earlier violation of a sacred site by the Spartans.¹¹⁸ Sailors would offer prayers and libations to deities for safe voyages.¹¹⁹ Sacrificial festivals were held throughout the agricultural year of the Greeks in order to ensure that the gods were pleased. The deities kept mice and locusts away to ensure good harvests.¹²⁰ Sickness was a major threat to humanity where life expectancy was short, and the gods were called upon for deliverance and healing.¹²¹

There is ample evidence in Jewish writings that suffering was considered retributive. That is, suffering was seen as God's punishment for human rebellion, and in the case of Israel, suffering was the result of covenantal unfaithfulness. In the primordial story of Gen 3, the curses on Adam and Eve were the result of their disobedience. The lists of covenantal blessings and curses in Deut 28 are vivid examples of God's retributive justice. Israel's disobedience would lead to fear, oppression by enemies, agricultural disasters, crop pests, famine, illness, harm from wild animals, infertility, and

117. Ibid., 139.

118. Croy, *Endurance*, 136.

119. For example, The twin sons of Zeus (Castor and Pollux; Δίδσχοιροι) that are found in Acts 28:11 were found on the rigging of ships in the Greco-Roman world. Cf. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 266–67.

120. Ibid., 265.

121. For example, the sanctuary of the Temple of Apollo Epikourios at Bassae was probably dedicated as the thanksgiving for the deliverance from the plague in 429 BCE. Asklepios, popular in the NT period, was known as the god of healing. See Jeffers, *Greco-Roman*, 93.

eventually exile.¹²² Their obedience would lead to a population increase, agricultural bounty, health, prosperity, and return from exile.¹²³ Numbers 16:45–50 and 2 Sam 24:1–25 tell stories where plagues started because of human sinfulness but were stopped when atoning sacrifices were made.¹²⁴ A careful reading of the Jewish Scripture will find that a significant concern of Israel's prophets was the people's unfaithfulness. Their condemnation of idolatry and social injustice is arguably a warning against covenantal curses in Deuteronomy.¹²⁵ As Croy says, "The prophetic texts presupposing a causal relationship between sin and human suffering could be multiplied almost endlessly."¹²⁶ There is no doubt that a retributive view of suffering is present in Jewish thinking. This view of suffering makes Rom 8:31–39 fascinating reading, for it speaks of God's election and justification in the midst of the suffering of believers. In our exegesis we will ask how the audience would have understood the periscope, given the ancient conception of retributive justice.

Suffering of the Righteous

While evidence of retributive/punitive suffering abounds, there are voices that challenge the notion that every instance of affliction is caused by people's wrongdoing. In fact, recognition of the educative value of suffering is often the result of the fact that people do suffer innocently. Plato, for example, questions whether evil can come from god,¹²⁷ and thinks that suffering can be seen as divine chastisement *with beneficial effect* on those who suffer.¹²⁸ Likewise, the examples in *Psalms of Solomon* and Tobit cited above concerning God's testing and training are applied to the suffering of the righteous (*Ps. Sol.* 16:14–15; Tob 12:13–14).¹²⁹ In the following we will

122. Deut 29:19–24; 31:17, 21, 29 contain further examples of retributive justice expressed in the Torah.

123. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, xxxii–xxli, provides a summary of covenantal blessings and curses.

124. See Num 8:19 for another correlation between atonement and plagues.

125. See Deut 28:15–68; cf. Lev 26:14–46; Deut 32:1–43. As Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, xxxii, argues, the prophets know that YHWH uses them to call "his people back to obedience to the covenant he had given them many centuries before . . ."

126. Croy, *Endurance*, 87.

127. Plato says, for instance, that god cannot be responsible for everything, and that we must look for some other factors (other than god) as the cause of evil (*Resp.* 2.379b).

128. Croy, *Endurance*, 139.

129. There are places in both Israel's Scripture and later Jewish literature that speak of the suffering of the righteous. Smith, *Seven Explanations*, 9–200, identifies seven

outline three types of “suffering of the righteous” that are, as we will see in our exegesis, particularly relevant to our inquiry because of the intertextual links between Romans and Jewish writings.

First, the authors of the Psalter and Wisdom literature wrestle with the notion of retributive justice in suffering. In their prayers and wisdom sayings they speak of the suffering of the righteous. The preacher in Ecclesiastes observes that life is absurd because the righteous perish in their righteousness while the wicked live long (7:15), and they all share a common destiny (9:2). While Ps 1 clearly speaks of YHWH’s retributive justice, there are lament Psalms in which the psalmists complain and protest because they see their suffering as undeserved. Also, Job’s friends assume that his sufferings result from God’s just judgment on his wickedness. But Job is innocent, and YHWH’s answers at the end provide no clear explanation for his affliction. These instances challenge the notion that suffering is purely the result of human sinful acts. The lament and protest of the suffering righteous in these writings are particularly useful for our study of the citation of Ps 44:22 in Rom 8:36.

Second, the suffering of the Servant in the Isaianic Servant Songs provides another prime example of innocent suffering.¹³⁰ The Songs are remarkably found in a prophetic book where warnings against unfaithfulness abound. Admittedly the Servant suffers because of the sins of others, but the Servant himself/herself is innocent. There are several passages in Rom 5–8 that seem to echo the Servant Songs, which will be discussed in our exegesis.

The third area of interest in Jewish thought is the eschatological vindication of the suffering righteous in apocalyptic literature, as well as the martyrdom theology found in 2 Maccabees. Jewish apocalyptic literature often speaks of the hope a sufferer finds in God’s faithfulness in spite of Israel’s unfaithfulness. The sufferer is determined to be loyal to Israel’s God and believes that he will vindicate those who suffer innocently. A good example is found in Dan 9:17–19, where the prophet (and his companions) suffer as faithful righteous sufferers in captivity.

Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant
and to his supplication, and for your own sake, Lord, let your

categories of the suffering of the righteous in the Jewish and Pauline literatures, which are essentially non-retributive. They are: suffering resulting from persecution; remedial suffering; suffering as salvation-historical necessity; probationary suffering; the effect of the sin of the first human; pedagogical suffering; and suffering as participation in Christ. (The last category is only found in Pauline letters, according to Smith.)

130. The Isaianic Servant Songs are found in Isa 42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–11; and 52:13–53:12.

face shine upon your desolated sanctuary. Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and look at our desolation and the city that bears your name. We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay! For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name!¹³¹

Set in a context where Daniel and his friends seek to remain faithful in the face of severe oppression by a hostile political power, the prophet confesses the sins of his people and asks God for deliverance for his own name's sake. This reminds us of the eschatological suffering of the righteous found in *The Thanksgiving Hymns* in the Dead Sea Scrolls. For example, in 1QH 9:1–11 the author speaks of their hope in God's loving kindness in the midst of pain, slander, desolation, and the threat of death.¹³² It also calls to mind the theology of martyrdom in 2 Macc 6:1–7:42—the faithful are exhorted to trust in God in the midst of suffering with the hope of his ultimate vindication and deliverance. It is believed that the calamity of Israel is the result of their sins, but God does not forsake his people (6:16). The martyrdoms of Eleazar, the seven brothers and their mother demonstrate that belief. Their hope is that their suffering will bring an end to the wrath of the Almighty (7:38). They put their whole trust in the Lord (7:39).¹³³ This particular Jewish understanding of suffering is an interesting backdrop to the texts in Rom 8:18–23 in our exegesis, where apocalyptic language is found.

Cosmic Dimension of Suffering

It is important to note that embedded in our discussion of ancient worldviews is the cosmic dimension of suffering. Whether it is the suffering of individuals (e.g., sickness), nature (e.g., famine), or socio-political oppression (e.g., battle defeat), the ancients believe that suffering and cosmic powers

¹³¹ NRSV.

¹³² For further discussion, see Croy, *Endurance*, 116–23.

¹³³ See Kleinknecht, *Der leidende Gerechtfertigte*, 123–26, for a discussion on the tradition of the suffering just in 2 Maccabees. See Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom*, 13–46, for a discussion on the theology of martyrdom in Judaism. For a critique of Pobee's interpretation of Paul, see Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 82n15; Lim, *Sufferings*, 8–9. As our exegesis will show, Gorman is right in saying that Paul's understanding of suffering goes beyond a theology of martyrdom. Our interest, however, does not lie in whether Paul's theology of suffering borrows from this particular tradition in Judaism. What we are saying here is simply that 2 Maccabees provides a helpful background for our exegesis.

are interconnected. The Greco-Roman literature, for example, refers to the ancients' belief that cosmic powers and human affliction are interlinked. There is a causal relationship between sacrilege and suffering (as mentioned above).¹³⁴ Homer thinks that all things, good and evil, can be traced back to deity,¹³⁵ and indeed, Seneca says that everything happens according to god's will.¹³⁶

The cosmic dimension of suffering is clearly found in the apocalyptic visions of Dan 7–12, which are good examples of the Jewish worldview that cosmic forces hold sway over human affairs, including the rise and fall of human kingdoms.¹³⁷ Political and social systems, as well as the associated suffering of God's people, are closely connected with the cosmic powers in the visions. The battles between God and evil powers are depicted with vivid imagery. There is a strong sense of *hope in God's final triumph over evil powers*, with the appearance of a "Son of Human" (υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου) as the figure for that hope—whose kingdom and dominion (ἐξουσία) over the peoples (ἔθνη) will last eternally throughout the ages (αἰώνιος) (7:13–14).

Indeed, the assumption in Israel's Scripture is that cosmic powers are behind human suffering. Not only is God the ultimate cosmic power, evil forces are mentioned not infrequently. In primordial history, the serpent represents the cosmic evil force that caused the first humans' disobedience. The serpent is identified as Satan in the Christian apocalyptic literature of Rev 20:2. Satan is, of course, depicted in Job 1–2 as the evil figure behind Job's multifaceted suffering, which includes sicknesses, a storm, loss of life, and loss of properties. Satan is also the one who incites David to count the people of Israel (1 Chr 21:1). A plague on Israel starts as a result, which is halted when David offers a sacrifice as a burnt offering and peace offering. Satan is also the accuser of the high priest Joshua in Zech 3:1–2.¹³⁸ Indeed, the term "Satan" (σατανᾶς) is used frequently in early Christian writings, including Romans (16:20), and represents the cosmic power behind all sorts of evil.¹³⁹ The Exodus story (not least the ten plagues) is not only about the

134. For instance, Horace says that the neglect of temples and shrines has caused the gods to send defeats and misfortunes in Rome (*Carm.* 3.6). See also Croy, *Endurance*, 156.

135. Croy, *Endurance*, 134.

136. Seneca, *Nat.* 3.12. See also Croy, *Endurance*, 147.

137. I am indebted to Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, 55, for his insights here.

138. The term σατανᾶς also appears in Sir 21:27 in the LXX, and διάβολος in 1 Macc 1:36; Wis 2:24.

139. The term σατανᾶς appears fourteen times in the Gospels, seven in the undisputed Pauline letters, seven in Revelation, and three in the rest of the NT. The term διάβολος appears thirty-seven times in the NT.

liberation of slaves, but also, for the ancient audience, the cosmic battle between YHWH and the Egyptian gods that stood behind the political powers in Egypt.¹⁴⁰ In fact, Israel's faith hinged on the belief that YHWH is greater than all other gods, and hence was able to protect them from evil cosmic forces (e.g., Pss 95:3; 96:4; 97:9; 135:5; 136:2).¹⁴¹ In short, cosmic powers transcend all human affairs—social, religious, and political—and indeed, the entire created order. We may, therefore, say that they are the ultimate forces behind suffering.

Summary

In sum, suffering is an integral part of a web of interlocked cosmic powers, socioeconomic and religio-political systems. In both Jewish and Greco-Roman literature, suffering is often understood to have educative value. But it is also widely thought that suffering is retributive or punitive. That is, it is the result of YHWH's/the gods' punishment for human wrongdoings. Libations and prayers are often demanded for the alleviation or prevention of suffering. Although this view of hardship is very common, there are voices that speak of the suffering of the innocent. We find these voices in both Jewish and Greco-Roman writings where they speak of the training value of suffering. But they are more prominent in Israel's Wisdom literature, the Isaianic Servant Songs, and the apocalyptic literature, as well as 2 Maccabees. Finally, it is clear that the ancients see a cosmic dimension in suffering. In fact, cosmic powers, socio-political injustice, and all manner of affliction, are interconnected.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have studied the social location of the first-century audience of Romans. While we do not have access to Paul's real audience, our socio-historical analysis has given us a general picture of the social world of Rome. We have discovered that affliction and distress were embedded in a network of interconnected social, economic, religious, and political systems

140. See Enns, *Evolution*, 43–44. Indeed, according to ANE literature, the kingship of Pharaoh is not only political, but also religious and cosmological. As, Strawn, "Pharaoh," 632, says, "Pharaoh was lawgiver, judge and, in theory at least, the only true priest to the gods. . . Yet this centrality was not only political or religious . . . it was also cosmological. Kingship was introduced at the time of creation: the creator-god was the first king, and according to the Memphite theology Horus was the king of Egypt."

141. See Enns, *Evolution*, 44–45.

in Rome,¹⁴² which were in turn inseparable from the cosmic forces in the world. We have found that a large portion of the letter's audience suffered from various forms of socioeconomic hardship and religio-political injustice. This picture of suffering will be used in our exegesis when we consider how an audience familiar with affliction would have heard Romans. Our study of the ancient worldviews of suffering has found that suffering was considered to have educative value. Having said that, it was often perceived to be retributive. But there were also alternative voices that spoke of the suffering of the righteous. In addition, most likely cosmic powers were considered to be the ultimate forces behind suffering. With this background in mind, we are in a position to read the references to suffering in Romans from the perspective of the letter's audience. We are ready to embark on our exegesis now.

142. Morley, "The Poor," 33–36, helpfully highlights three characteristics of poverty in Rome: vulnerability, exclusion, and shame. Morley recognizes that not everyone was poor by every one of these. But, "poverty in one respect might well lead to another, as shame contributed to social exclusion and social exclusion reinforced vulnerability, since the outcast could not rely on networks of reciprocity or patronage in times of crisis" (36).