

Hidden Transcripts, Models of Empire, and the Gospel of Luke

As outlined in the previous chapter, this project will make extensive use of various models from sociology, anthropology, and political science. Such models, while always in need of contextual specificity,¹ provide an important basis for better understanding the world of an ancient text like the Gospel of Luke, which is far removed in time, space, culture, and worldview from the lives of today's readers and interpreters. Luke was not written, nor did Jesus and the disciples live, in a religious vacuum separate from the social, political, and cultural structures of their day, and they should not be treated as if they did. While there may be some concern over the possibly anachronistic application of modern models to ancient peoples,² carefully chosen social-scientific models yield great insight into the biblical text and help modern readers minimize the unconscious imposition of our own cultural norms and values. Thus I will consider in some detail here the work of three social scientists who illuminate issues of power, empire, and resistance in societies similar to and including the Roman Empire.

Gerhard Lenski examines the history of social stratification, the problem of "who gets what [resources] and why."³ Particularly important for the study of biblical texts in general and Luke in particular is Lenski's extensive two-chapter treatment of agrarian societies, of which the Roman Empire was one.⁴ John

1. Dennis C. Duling, "Empire: Theories, Methods, Models," in *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context*, ed. John Riches and David C. Sim, JSNTSup 276 (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 73.

2. Stephen C. Barton, "Historical Criticism and Social-Scientific Perspectives in New Testament Study," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995), 74–75; Philip Francis Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology*, SNTSMS 57 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 12.

3. Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (1966; repr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 2–3.

H. Kautsky focuses more narrowly on the politics of the imperial ruling strata, the aristocracy that lives off the labor of those of lower status.⁵ While he does not consider Rome, with its numerous and thriving merchants, to have been a pure aristocratic empire,⁶ much of his work still enlightens relevant aspects of its imperial politics. Finally, James C. Scott's discussion of subordinated peoples' hidden resistance to their situation of domination will be engaged fully, with a special focus on the role played in such resistance by imagery, texts, and festivals of status reversal. I will close the chapter with a survey of the initial efforts of New Testament scholarship to apply Scott's theory to the Gospels in a systematic manner, as these studies undergird the role of the hidden transcript in the status-reversal passages that are the focus of this project. All of these models will prove invaluable in enhancing our understanding of the Lukan community's everyday setting, experience of the Roman Empire, and likely range of responses to the Gospel's status reversals.

GERHARD LENSKI AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Gerhard Lenski's extensive study *Power and Privilege* deals first with the causes of social stratification, the nearly universal process by which human societies distribute scarce valuable resources to various groups and members.⁷ Although we can argue interminably about whether such stratification is good or bad, natural or human-initiated, the reality is that it exists in essentially every human society, and especially in the Roman Empire of Jesus, Luke, and the New Testament. The very word "empire" is based on the Latin verb *imperare* (to command) and is regularly defined as a hierarchical system of absolute authority and unequal power relations based on military might.⁸ The Roman Empire was certainly such a political entity, with supreme power ascribed to the emperor and his local representatives. Additionally, it controlled so many territories and their attendant resources that the economic surplus, and the power inequality caused by its unequal distribution,⁹ were both massive. Lenski provides valuable insight on how this distribution of power, privilege, and wealth was determined in general, and specifically in agrarian societies like the Roman Empire.

4. Ibid., 189–296.

5. John H. Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 24.

6. Ibid., 33–39.

7. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, ix–x.

8. Duling, "Empire," 51.

9. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 46, 85.

The human drive to live with others in a social system is an inescapable reality of both history and our everyday lives. But at the same time, individuals and individual groups have their own interests that they seek to fulfill. Lenski argues forcefully that the behavior of any single person is determined by self-interest; even cooperative actions usually have some self-serving result (he gives the example of “antagonistic cooperation” in team sports, where individual players cooperate with their teammates only because they cannot play the game and experience the satisfaction of victory without one another).¹⁰ In a similar manner, the goals of a society, usually dictated by the ruling group, seek the consolidation of as many valuable resources as possible. Actions that result in survival, health, status, and the wealth that provides these commodities are regularly condoned and undertaken even when they harm others (either of another group or the lower members of the society itself).¹¹ Extensive intra-group sacrifice, for example, seldom translates to a similar willingness to help those outside the group, thus allowing Lenski to argue that even such cooperation has a selfish motive of personal gain through group preservation.¹² He concludes that the two major aims of any human society (or at least its dominant group) are to maintain the political status quo and maximize the production of resources.¹³

The Roman Empire, for example, claimed to benefit all over whom it ruled, but in reality (as in Lenski’s model), the benefits accrued mainly to the elites. Augustus’s *Res Gestae*, an autobiographical narration of his reign, extensively details the many benefits and services he extended to the people who came under his rule; they were expected to offer in turn their unconditional loyalty and deference.¹⁴ Also a good illustration of this claim to benefaction is a statement from Cicero (c. 60 BCE): “The province of Asia must be mindful of the fact that if it were not part of our empire it would have suffered every sort of misfortune that foreign wars and domestic unrest can bring. . . . Let Asia not grudge its part of the revenues in return for permanent peace and tranquility.”¹⁵ There is evidence that Augustus’s patronage did indeed help several provinces of Asia Minor recover from long years of civil war,¹⁶ and the vast task of supplying

10. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

11. *Ibid.*, 41.

12. *Ibid.*, 28–29.

13. *Ibid.*, 41–42.

14. Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 149.

15. Quoted in Craigie B. Champion, ed., *Roman Imperialism: Readings and Sources, Interpreting Ancient History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 261.

the city of Rome with sufficient food meant that grain farmers throughout the provinces had a ready-made market for their produce.¹⁷ Even some modern classical scholars seem convinced that the benefactions provided by the elites eased the tension of the extensive social, economic, and political inequality that was the hallmark of the Roman Empire.¹⁸

Upon closer inspection, however, this “peace and tranquility” proves to be at best an ambiguous benefit for the empire’s non-elites. The emperor, according to Pliny the Younger’s speech around the turn of the first century CE, was accountable primarily to the elites and the furthering of their interests.¹⁹ Local provincial elites were the true beneficiaries of Roman rule because it was in the interest of the empire to allow them to maintain power and increase their wealth and status.²⁰ The basic pattern of life was subsistence-level existence for the vast majority of the population, while those of high status cemented their place with an ever-increasing share of the available wealth, land, and power.²¹ The wages of a basic laborer and the income of a senator stood roughly at a ratio of one to two hundred, and even in the military, an elite tribune made four hundred times what a common legionary did, and over six times the pay of a centurion.²² The elite portion of the tax burden demanded by Rome from Asia Minor and elsewhere was almost certainly passed on to non-elites at a level they could ill afford, effectively stripping many peasants of their best resources and forcing them into extensive indebtedness.²³ One scholar calculated that at least 10 percent and maybe as many as 44 percent of loans made went into default, with the debtor then losing land, property, and on occasion even the

16. See, e.g., David W. J. Gill, “Achaia,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf, *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 441; and Paul Trebilco, “Asia,” in Gill and Gempf, *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, 299–300.

17. Phil Perkins, “Power, Culture and Identity in the Roman Economy,” in *Experiencing Rome: Culture, Identity, and Power in the Roman Empire*, ed. Janet Huskinson (London: Routledge, 2000), 209.

18. E.g., Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 148.

19. Christopher Kelly, *The Roman Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 33–34.

20. *Ibid.*, 46–48.

21. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 43, 51–52; and Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 38–39, 42.

22. C. R. Whitaker, “The Poor,” in *The Romans*, ed. Andrea Giardina (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 278.

23. Michael H. Crawford, “Rome and the Greek World: Economic Relationships,” in Champion, *Roman Imperialism*, 98; Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 98; Keith Hopkins, “Conquerors and Slaves: The Impact of Conquering an Empire on the Political Economy of Italy,” in Champion, *Roman Imperialism*, 117–18; and MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 33–34.

entire family's freedom, to the (usually elite) lender.²⁴ Basically, in the words of Ramsey MacMullen, "Rome wrung ultimately from the provincial peasants all that could be economically extracted."²⁵

What we find, though, in the life of Jesus and the work of the third evangelist, particularly in the status reversals that are the focus of this study, is the opposite of Lenski's conclusions about societal maintenance: a celebration of and call to *destabilize* and even overturn the political and economic status quo. The Jesus movement was only one among many groups that exhibited some knowledge of and resistance to this disconnect between propaganda and reality.²⁶ Hostility toward local elites was often linked to resentment of Roman taxes. Residents of Dyme in Achaëa, for example, had to be subdued militarily when they called for a cancellation of all debts and attempted to burn the city loan records.²⁷ Moreover, formal complaints were sometimes lodged against those with social and material resources who were more than willing, through excessive rent or tax, the purposeful ruin of crops, and even physical injury, to exploit those who lacked such resources.²⁸ Thus it is clear that non-elites were well aware of the inequality and vulnerability of their position in the Roman social order.

In contrast, the Lukan community is presented with a Jesus who breaks from Lenski's basic model of preserving the status quo, as he deliberately helps those outside his own social group, even assisting a centurion, one of the occupying Roman force (7:1-10), and going so far as to sacrifice his own life so that repentance and forgiveness might be extended "to all nations" (24:47). From the very start, then, we must consider the Gospel of Luke as a story and a message that would have raised some eyebrows among its Roman-era audience, accustomed as they were to a sharply stratified power differential—offending some, perhaps resonating with others, and most likely doing a little of both at the same time.

In Lenski's analysis, human societies tend toward a repetitive political cycle wherein a new elite group seizes power by force and violence, and then tries to legitimize its rule "by right" instead of "might."²⁹ This transformation is usually

24. Jerry Toner, *Popular Culture in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2009), 24–25. For a discussion of loan records and evidence that a high proportion of debtors were farmers, see MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 51–52.

25. MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 36.

26. Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2001), 50–51.

27. Crawford, "Rome and the Greek World," 98.

28. MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 8–11.

29. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 59.

gained through ideological changes such as revamped laws and (sometimes forced) endorsement of the new ruling group by other institutions (educational, media, religious, etc.), changes that require cunning and intelligence rather than the original military power.³⁰ Thus, with power consolidated and its rule presented as natural or divinely sanctioned, the new elite group is able to dictate how status, wealth, and privilege are to be distributed, and the majority of non-elites are essentially powerless to change it. In the Roman Empire, this legitimizing “myth of supernatural power” was centered upon the person of the emperor as the carrier of divine will and favor for the entire realm.³¹ Augustus began cementing his rule almost immediately by, among other things, combining elements from various Trojan, Greek, and Roman myths to create a legendary divine ancestry for both himself and the city of Rome.³² His effort was augmented by deferential authors like Virgil, whose *Aeneid* proclaims Rome’s natural, divinely given right to rule through the mouth of Jupiter himself. Rome, according to Virgil’s account, is “destined to rule Earth’s peoples . . . to pacify, to impose the rule of law, to spare the conquered, to battle down the proud.”³³ The truth of this claim to just rule, of course, is up for much debate. For one thing, Rome’s “rule of law” generally left the non-elites with only the bare necessities of resources, so that, according to Lenski, their lives were too consumed with survival to have time to engage extensively in elite politics.³⁴ Again, however, Luke seems to break with this assessment. The Gospel, and the status reversals in particular, envision a new ideology that is centrally concerned with a change in the status quo in all aspects of society: political, religious, economic, and social.

One weakness of Lenski’s model stems from his modern worldview, which separates these realms from one another; in the first-century world they were all inextricably entwined. Modern scholars often assert Luke’s complacency with Roman rule or advance an apolitical reading, based on this erroneous separation and on the fact that he never calls for overt military rebellion.³⁵

30. Ibid., 52–55.

31. J. Rufus Fears, “The Cult of Jupiter and Roman Imperial Ideology,” in *ANRW* 2.17.1, ed. Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), 7–9.

32. Janet Huskinson, “Élite Culture and the Identity of Empire,” in Huskinson, *Experiencing Rome*, 102.

33. Quoted in Kelly, *Roman Empire*, 21.

34. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 54.

35. See, e.g., the discussion of Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 95–100: “For in [Luke’s] report there is no promise, call, or action by Jesus for an overthrow of Roman imperial rule. . . . Jesus does not advocate even nonviolent passive resistance to it” (95); and François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine M. Thomas, Hermeneia, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,

Such assumptions result in a view of the evangelist as having solely religious concerns,³⁶ or in a reading that equates a nonretaliatory stance with offering full approval to the imperial order and negates the political ramifications of the Gospel's focus on social justice.³⁷ In reality, the third evangelist very possibly functioned for his audiences as Lenski's "rebellious intellectual" who provides "the catalytic agent, the counterideology, which is necessary for every successful social revolution."³⁸ His role is that of a visionary who develops the picture of a new social order and leaves it up to the audience to support and implement it. Notably, Luke treats centurions well in his work (Luke 7:1-10; 23:44-47; Acts 10:1-11:18), as well as minorities like Samaritans (Luke 10:25-37; Acts 8:4-25) and eunuchs (Acts 8:26-40). Such groups, particularly members of the military willing to transfer their loyalty away from the ruling powers, are especially important to social revolutions.³⁹ Thus we see perhaps some ambiguity in Luke's vision here: violence and extensive wealth are not condoned, but it is necessary to have access to both power and material resources to carry out real social change.

Finally, before moving to the specifics of agrarian social systems, we must address one more general aspect of Lenski's model: status inconsistency. Any given individual has varying ranks in different "class systems" (in Lenski's terminology), such as political power, property, occupation, ethnicity, and religious establishment. Cultures as a whole struggle to define which of these should be valued more highly,⁴⁰ and individuals tend to view themselves in terms of the system that accords them their highest possible position. Others, meanwhile, are more likely to evaluate them by their lower positions instead, leading to status inconsistency.⁴¹ A member of an ethnic minority, for example, in a highly skilled, high-status occupation, or a merchant with plenty of wealth but little social standing, is likely to experience some kind of conflict as a result of these divergent rankings. Roman freedpersons (manumitted slaves) are

2002), 9: "Luke wants to . . . quell Roman fears about the Christian mission. Luke is convinced that the gospel is politically innocuous; on the contrary, the ethical attitude of the Christians can only work to the advantage of their pagan neighbors."

36. As in John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, WBC 35a (Dallas: Word, 1989), xxxii-xxxiii.

37. As in John K. Riches, "The Synoptic Evangelists and Their Communities," in *Christian Beginnings: Word and Community from Jesus to Post-Apostolic Times*, ed. Jürgen Becker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 236-37.

38. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 71.

39. Ibid., 71-72. For examples of native revolt leaders with experience in the Roman military, see Stephen L. Dyson, "Native Revolts in the Roman Empire," *Historia* 20 (1971): 255, 264.

40. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 81.

41. Ibid., 87-88.

perhaps one of the clearest examples of this phenomenon. Some of them gained great wealth using skills learned from their elite masters, but the stigma of slavery lowered their honor and status for life,⁴² as well as opening them up to jealousy and mockery from both above and below.⁴³ This kind of treatment made such people prime candidates to be leaders in social change, as they possessed resources like wealth, status, and leadership skills often denied to other non-elites, but also a certain measure of grievance with the status quo.⁴⁴ This dissatisfaction, combined with the experience of at least some level of prejudice, also led those who did not fit easily into Rome's hierarchy to have greater empathy for the unfortunate, such as the Greek foreigner who is the only person from the Roman era memorialized on his tomb as a "lover of the poor."⁴⁵ I will show in the following chapters that the depiction of Jesus and other Lukan figures as having such status inconsistency would likely have resonated with, and perhaps motivated, a community of readers and hearers in similar situations.

Probably the piece of Lenski's work that is best-known in the area of biblical scholarship is the chart reproduced here, a visual representation of status groups in agrarian societies, by number and amount of power and privilege.⁴⁶

Indeed, Lenski's two extensive chapters on agrarian societies, of which the Roman Empire was one of the largest and best documented, provide valuable insight into the daily life and cultural experience of the first-century writers, readers, and hearers of the New Testament writings. The primary characteristic of any agrarian society was its use of the plow, which enlarged farming from small plots to entire fields. This technological advance, combined with the development of transportation and military technology like wheels, sails, and cavalry, generated a surplus of valued resources both tangible and intangible that grew exponentially, along with the level of power and status inequality.⁴⁷ Dominant agrarian societies tended to grow into "conquest states" that subjugated other ethnic and religious groups to their central power; the Roman Republic and later Empire is a prime example.⁴⁸ Power in all its forms (economic, political, religious, and cultural) became concentrated in urban

42. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 120; and Valerie Hope, "Status and Identity in the Roman World," in Huskinson, *Experiencing Rome*, 130, 138.

43. Hope, "Status and Identity," 143–44. The first-century author Petronius sharply parodied the stereotypical wealthy but gauche freedperson through the character of Trimalchio (Huskinson, "Élite Culture," 103–4).

44. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 88.

45. Whittaker, "The Poor," 296–97.

46. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 284.

47. *Ibid.*, 190, 193.

48. *Ibid.*, 195–96.

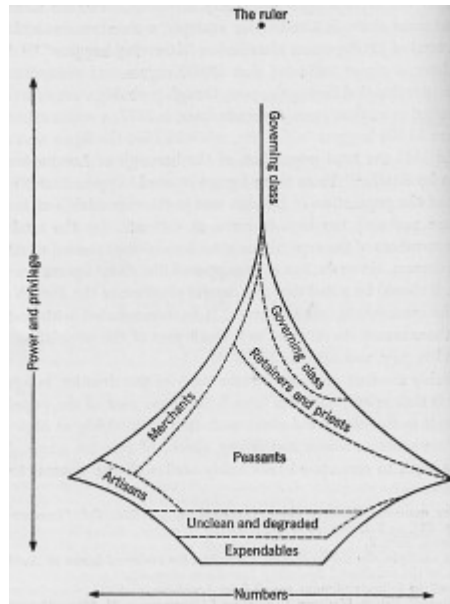


Figure 1: A graphic representation of the relationship among classes in agrarian societies.

centers, as economic surplus, specialized goods, and artisans skilled in all occupations gathered in the cities in order to serve the elites who were based there.⁴⁹ This was particularly true in the Greek East, where, even under Roman rule, Hellenistic city-states maintained a level of self-governance (through local elite magistrates loyal to Rome) and influence over their surrounding rural territories.⁵⁰ Thus, with insight drawn from sociohistorical and sociological analysis, one would expect an urban audience of Luke's Gospel to be a diverse gathering of people, coming from a wide variety of levels on Lenski's diagram of stratification. Most likely every individual heard the story of Jesus with somewhat different understandings, based on her or his unique standing in the community.⁵¹

49. Ibid., 200, 205.

50. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 28.

51. Lenski's model regrettably does not account for gender to any significant degree. Many married women likely shared their husbands' status, but there are also accounts of widows or single women at all social levels with their own standing and independent resources. Particularly as resources like money and power increased, some women wielded considerable prestige and political power (Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 135). Claudia Capitolina, e.g., from a Roman senatorial family, is recorded as a major patron of a synagogue in Asia Minor (Margaret Williams, "Jews and Jewish Communities in the Roman Empire," in Huskinson, *Experiencing Rome*, 312). For further information, see also Bernadette J.

At the pinnacle of Lenski's stratification model is, of course, the ruler (in our case, the Roman emperor) and the elite governing class (senators, governors, procurators, local elites or decurions). This small proportion of the population controlled governmental responsibilities and almost all of the land and its surplus produce (either directly through a proprietary right or indirectly through taxes and tariffs).⁵² Land ownership provided the elites with the security of prestige and wealth that could be passed down generationally, while public office offered ample opportunity for political and economic advancement. In the imperial provinces, local elite hierarchies were modeled on that of Rome and mirrored its constant jostling for status and competitive "benefaction."⁵³ Required of city magistrates, these charitable donations of public buildings, entertainment, food, and other civic services served more to legitimize and cement the domination of Rome and its local elite collaborators than they did to provide significant lasting help to the non-elite citizenry.⁵⁴

Essential to maintaining this status quo that so favored the ruler and governing elites was the retainer group, which served the political elite as servants, petty officials, professional soldiers, and personal retainers; for this service they received a (small) share in the economic surplus and a status ranking slightly above that of the common "masses."⁵⁵ One of the most important characteristics of retainers was their complete dependence upon the elites' pleasure and approval (quite unlike the modern concept of a middle class). Retainers were used by the elites to carry out and maintain their exploitation of the vast majority, acting as buffers and mediators who implemented the actual transfer of surplus and absorbed much of the non-elites' hostility in the process.⁵⁶ Loyalty to the elites and thus to the status quo was necessary to maintain one's retainer status and maximize personal power and prestige, and conversely, the defection of the retainers to the non-elites would greatly endanger the security of those of highest status. Thus, in the Gospels, Jesus engages repeatedly and intensely with retainers like Pharisees⁵⁷ and centurions,⁵⁸ who are embedded in the Roman status quo, and whose positive or

Brooten, "Early Christian Women and Their Cultural Context: Issues of Method in Historical Reconstruction," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, Biblical Scholarship in North America (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985), 65–91; and Carolyn Osiek, Margaret Y. MacDonald, and Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 17–49, 194–219.

52. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 214–16, 220–21.

53. Hope, "Status and Identity," 137.

54. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 33; and Whittaker, "The Poor," 294–95.

55. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 243–44.

56. *Ibid.*, 246.

negative reaction to his vision of the reign of God had potentially far-reaching ramifications.

Like the retainer group, merchants and priests in agrarian societies had a wide range of wealth and power somewhere between the elite rulers and the numerous peasants. The merchant group, of course, dealt in trading goods mostly to the elite, with whom they had a complicated love-hate relationship. Merchants usually had some sort of humble beginning (whether as a “landless” younger son of the elites or perhaps as an ambitious peasant with some capital) and took an unusually large chunk of the economic surplus away from the elites,⁵⁹ but at the same time the two groups were dependent upon each other for the provision of luxury goods.⁶⁰ Most importantly, however, and unlike the retainers, they enjoyed a certain amount of freedom from elite rule; merchants were in market relationships with those of higher status, rather than under their direct authority as employees.⁶¹

Lenski’s “priestly class,” those in roles as religious leaders, also occupied a mixed position in agrarian societies. They had something of a privileged role, especially in the higher echelons, but were also, in theory at least, supposed to serve a deity rather than the ruler and elites.⁶² The relationship between political and religious authorities was both naturally symbiotic and naturally contentious because of the constant struggle over which authority (ruler or deity) was ultimately higher.⁶³ Priestly influence therefore varied greatly across, and even within, individual societies. Rome attempted to solve this problem by making the ruler and deity essentially identical.⁶⁴ As a result, the public imperial cult was completely enmeshed with politics, and its priests were appointed public officials, usually elites serving a limited term of office at the pleasure of Rome and its representatives.⁶⁵

57. On the Pharisees’ role as retainers for the ruling elite and their status as political and social leaders, see Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), 41–42, 277–97.

58. As professional soldiers of non-elite status, centurions are one of the most common examples of retainers in the New Testament. For the placement of centurions and other military personnel in Lenski’s hierarchy, see Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 66; and Duling, “Empire,” 65.

59. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 248–49.

60. *Ibid.*, 255.

61. *Ibid.*, 250.

62. *Ibid.*, 266.

63. *Ibid.*, 261.

64. Fears, “Cult of Jupiter,” 9; and James Rives, “Religion in the Roman Empire,” in Huskinson, *Experiencing Rome*, 267.

Even the Jerusalem high priesthood had become, by the turn of the era, a political office awarded as a favor to elite insiders; Josephus records instances of both Julius Caesar and Herod the Great appointing favorites to the job (*J.W.* 1.199 and 1.437). This was one way that an elite seeking to legitimize his or her rule of military force obtained that especially useful witness of religious support. But at the same time, religious traditions often portray the deity or deities as fundamentally opposed to tyranny and inequality of the kind that the elites want endorsed. This image is found, for example, in the ancient Persian code of Hammurabi, the Levitical law code (for example, Lev. 19:9-18; 25:8-55), the Hebrew prophets (for example, 2 Samuel 11-12; Micah 2-3; Isa. 10:1-4; 11:1-9; 42:1-9), and many of the early Christian traditions (for example, Mark 9:33-37; 10:17-31; James 2:1-17; 5:1-6; Revelation 18).⁶⁶ Certainly Luke and the other Gospels, drawing upon teaching from both the Torah and the Prophets, portray Jesus as a leader focused on divine justice and with a comprehensive vision of a new society. As a result, he comes into serious, and in the end violent and fatal, conflict with the local elites of Jerusalem, whose true loyalty is shown to be with Rome and its rulers, rather than with the Hebrew ancestral traditions of equality and social justice. Religion, like everything else in the Roman world, involved public power negotiation.⁶⁷ And when an individual's dissenting private belief began to affect his public identity or increase her social power, conflict with Roman rule became almost inevitable.⁶⁸

The great majority of agrarian people fell into the large peasant and somewhat smaller artisan groups. Their work shouldered almost the entire burden of supporting the state and its elite rulers through taxes and forced labor that left them nothing except subsistence resources.⁶⁹ Peasants were mostly farmers, while artisans were craftspeople (sometimes peasants who had lost their land) who sometimes organized into guilds that could wield a measure of power for themselves.⁷⁰ In general, though, life as a peasant or artisan meant significantly lower levels of status, wealth, and power; degradation by the elites; and a limited exposure to alternate societal orders. The massive income difference between a laborer and an elite in the Roman Empire has already been delineated above. In addition to this inequality, more subtle domination tactics were masterfully employed by the imperial elite. Even in a relatively

65. Rives, "Religion," 249, 255.

66. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 263-64.

67. Kelly, *Roman Empire*, 30; and Rives, "Religion," 266.

68. Rives, "Religion," 258.

69. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 266-68.

70. *Ibid.*, 280.

peaceful region like Asia Minor, Roman military might, and the willingness to use it, served as an ever-present reminder of subjugation for provincials (peasant and elite alike): “Though rarely deployed, the threat of Roman retaliation for perceived provincial resistance hung like a storm cloud over the towns of empire.”⁷¹ Every day, the sharp stratification of imperial life took its toll on the physical and mental health of those of lower status. Modern studies have shown that stratified societies produce exponentially more intense social stressors on those of lower status.⁷² Thus we can conclude that the mental health of Roman non-elites would ordinarily have decreased rapidly under the burdens of heavy manual labor, subsistence living, extensive debt, poor living conditions, and violent treatment—burdens that the elites did not have to shoulder because those of lower status did.⁷³ Even the stress of status negotiation and its accompanying public insults took its toll; there is evidence that this was keenly felt by many Roman non-elites to be the worst part of being poor and having low status.⁷⁴

A few factors had the potential to improve the peasant’s lot to a limited extent, either in perception or in reality. When these factors were present, they could increase the level of non-elite acceptance of the ruling order in some cases. Elite benefaction in the form of public buildings, occasional food handouts, and sponsorship of games and entertainment served both to nominally benefit the people and to reinforce the Roman order. The games, especially, reproduced Rome’s view of the world in miniature: seating arrangements visually represented the imperial hierarchy for all in attendance; battle reenactments illustrated Roman military power; and the humiliation and execution of criminals and captives ridiculed any possible rule, law, or worldview except that of Rome.⁷⁵ Non-elites with slightly higher status, such as urban artisans, generally benefited more from this elite patronage, and therefore were more likely to be supportive of the status quo.⁷⁶ More actual benefit and opportunity for status improvement for all non-elites were found, Lenski notes, when the ruling group’s military force was dependent upon the service of average peasants. In this situation, elites tended to treat the peasants somewhat

71. Kelly, *Roman Empire*, 59–60.

72. Toner, *Popular Culture*, 58.

73. *Ibid.*, 62–74.

74. MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 111. MacMullen points to the example of non-elites being invited to elite feasts for the sole purpose of being humiliated and set apart from the “real” guests by substandard food, insulting seat placement, and public shaming.

75. Toner, *Popular Culture*, 114–17. See also Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 117; and Kelly, *Roman Empire*, 79–82.

76. Whittaker, “The Poor,” 297–98.

better.⁷⁷ It is no coincidence that military service was perhaps the surest way for a non-elite man to improve incrementally his status in the Roman Empire; a common soldier, for example, could be promoted to centurion and thus gain power, increased income, and potentially land (that most precious of resources in an agrarian economy).⁷⁸ Also, as discussed above, the presence of a religious system with social justice values had potential to benefit the peasant and artisan groups.⁷⁹ But despite these slight benefits, people of non-elite status still existed in what was essentially a state of oppression and exploitation. The effects of this domination and non-elite resistance to it will be examined in much greater detail in the discussion of Scott's model below.

Finally, the groups with the least status, power, and privilege were the degraded and expendable, including those in unacceptable but necessary professions (such as tanners, prostitutes, and miners) and those with no real means of survival except wits, crime, and charity (thieves, beggars, itinerants, and bandits).⁸⁰ These were segments of society that the dominant groups were unwilling to support because to do so cut into the elite share of the surplus without adding anything to it. These groups grew mainly as a result of the downward mobility that was quite extensive in agrarian societies, with some younger siblings of larger families potentially falling several steps down the status scale.⁸¹ Upward mobility was also possible (although seldom for the degraded and expendable), but usually only one step up per generation; and even then, it only occurred in relatively rare cases of good fortune, exceptional skills or intelligence, or a combination of the two.⁸² Interaction with these "lowest of the low" groups is, as we shall see, an important part of the stories of Jesus and the earliest Christian communities.

I have not yet addressed the place of slaves in agrarian empires, and they do not appear in the chart included above. Lenski's model regards them as peasants with legal rights and freedom that are more restricted than normal.⁸³ In the eastern Roman Empire, slaves played a minor role compared to their large numbers in Italy and Rome itself; land in the Greek and Asian provinces was worked mostly by free peasants, tenants, and day laborers.⁸⁴ Thus slavery

77. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 275.

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

79. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 276–77.

80. *Ibid.*, 280–81.

81. *Ibid.*, 290.

82. *Ibid.*, 291.

83. *Ibid.*, 288–89.

84. Kelly, *Roman Empire*, 111.

will not be a major issue in our discussion, focused as it is on the reception of Luke in the Greek East, but a brief statement is in order. Roman slaves are difficult to categorize as a single group because they varied so greatly in wealth, living conditions, and amount of power. They ranged from the valued imperial or elite household adviser with great wealth and influence, to the lowest farm laborer, and everything in between.⁸⁵ What they did have in common was a legal status that denied them freedom and a social stigma that remained even if they were fortunate enough to be manumitted. They were sometimes regarded as “speaking tools,” subject to abuse and ill treatment at their masters’ whims, with only the barest legal recognition of their humanity.⁸⁶ This juxtaposition led to significant status inconsistency for many slaves and freedpersons, which will be suggestive for our consideration of the perception of Luke and its status reversals in urban Asia Minor.

JOHN H. KAUTSKY AND ARISTOCRATIC POLITICS

While Lenski provides an excellent overview of social stratification in an agrarian society like Rome, John H. Kautsky’s *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* offers a more focused study of elite ruling groups and their origins, values, and governing role. He defines *aristocracy* as “a ruling class in an agrarian economy that does not engage in productive labor but lives wholly or primarily off the labor of peasants.”⁸⁷ This, of course, necessitates the presence in such a society of a significantly larger group of non-elite producers, or peasants. Kautsky’s work has strong areas of connection with Lenski’s agrarian models, but he identifies many of Lenski’s examples, including Rome, as “commercialized” (that is, incorporating things like private land ownership, a significant merchant class, and slavery) rather than “pure” or “traditional” aristocratic empires like medieval Europe or the Ottoman Empire.⁸⁸ This comparison yields some valuable insights for our work with the Roman Empire.

An aristocracy can arise out of its own indigenous populations, as some community members begin to take on the specialized role of protection or, loosely, government, while others cultivate and provide basic necessities. This seems to be the case with the Roman Republic.⁸⁹ Much more often, however, and during most of Rome’s imperial era, aristocratic societies originated by way

85. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 119; and Hope, “Status and Identity,” 140.

86. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 116; and Toner, *Popular Culture*, 70–71.

87. Kautsky, *Politics*, 24.

88. *Ibid.*, 20.

89. *Ibid.*, 57, 61–62.

of conquest, as one group subdued another by force and demanded tribute or booty, which is in Kautsky's view essentially a form of taxation whereby the conquerors are able to obtain enough resources to live comfortably.⁹⁰ The aristocracy was then maintained largely through hereditary inheritance and intermarriage. Who actually "owns" the land is relatively unimportant in a traditional aristocracy; the economic surplus (minus subsistence resources for the peasants) is paid to the elite, whether the peasants pay taxes on land they own or act as tenants and pay the elite landlord in kind.⁹¹ Eventually, the surplus goods can be extracted without violence, although the threat of it remains. The elites specialize in war and war-like endeavors because therein lies their main power to exploit the greater population; they are also then able to claim that they provide the service of protection and physical security to the peasants, in return for their surplus goods.⁹² This was the basic argument for the *pax romana* in Roman literature like the *Res Gestae*, Augustus's "explanation and justification of the conquest of the known world."⁹³ Similarly, Virgil claims in the *Aeneid* that Jupiter destined Rome to rule all nations in order to bring the great benefit of Roman civilization to the world's lesser peoples.⁹⁴ As I will demonstrate in the upcoming discussion, however, this public transcript claim is almost always a partial truth or faulty rationalization.

Kautsky maintains that there is a sharp divide between the aristocrats and the peasants, but overstates the case when he argues that they represent two different cultures. The "government" of the former over the latter consists mainly of warfare and taxation;⁹⁵ this is amply demonstrated by Rome's preference for localized government focused on those very two areas.⁹⁶ Provincial administration under the empire employed only about ten thousand bureaucrats to support a population roughly equivalent to the modern United Kingdom (which today requires about five hundred thousand employees).⁹⁷ Local elites, naturally, supported this minimalist approach to governing, as it allowed them to maintain their own prominence and power as local gentry.⁹⁸

90. Ibid., 52–53.

91. Ibid., 100.

92. Ibid., 100, 111.

93. Richard Miles, "Communicating Culture, Identity and Power," in Huskinson, *Experiencing Rome*, 41.

94. Fears, "Cult of Jupiter," 42.

95. Kautsky, *Politics*, 6, 144–55.

96. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 20.

97. Kelly, *Roman Empire*, 44.

98. Ibid., 44–45.

But contrary to Kautsky's argument that there was little to no interaction and thus little to no conflict between aristocrats and peasants,⁹⁹ local elites and their subordinates in the Roman Empire actually did have a sizable amount of contact and conflict with each other. Archaeological work done on a typical Italian villa, for example, indicates that the living spaces of the elite owner and the peasant (or slave) laborers were actually attached to each other, and the owner likely had significant involvement in the estate's work.¹⁰⁰ Patron-client relationships also by necessity involved regular interaction of elite and non-elite, so that the requisite favors, honor, and loyalty could be exchanged.¹⁰¹

Despite this interaction, elite culture was still vastly different from that of the non-elite. While conflict is often rife between empires and within the ruling group of a single society, Kautsky observes that the aristocratic system itself tends toward stability.¹⁰² The individual ruler might change, or the noble family wielding the most power at any given moment, but this has only minimal impact on the people as a whole, and does not change elite values. As mentioned above, military skills and their attendant ideals of service, duty, honor, and glory are ranked above almost anything else. Money is not something with which the elites were to concern themselves because their income is practically guaranteed; riches are then regarded as existing solely to be spent in a conspicuous display of immense wealth and nobility.¹⁰³ Connected to this is the aristocratic elite's claim to inherent superiority over the laboring peasants, townspeople, and even merchants who have to work in some way for survival.¹⁰⁴ Every part of an aristocratic society was set up to favor the elites over the non-elites, such as marriage customs designed to maintain the purity of noble blood,¹⁰⁵ and a justice system always stacked toward the elites who administered it, offering them lower penalties for major crimes but unbelievably stiff punishments to any commoner who dared to commit a crime against an aristocratic victim.¹⁰⁶ Under Roman law, the testimony of elite and non-elite was weighted differently, and penalties increased in severity as one's status decreased. This inequality intensified even further when the social

99. Kautsky, *Politics*, 73.

100. Perkins, "Power, Culture and Identity in the Roman Economy," 188–91.

101. See the discussion of patron-client relations in Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 151–52.

102. Kautsky, *Politics*, 247.

103. *Ibid.*, 188.

104. *Ibid.*, 200–1.

105. *Ibid.*, 205–10.

106. *Ibid.*, 199.

hierarchy became more entrenched, pushing the common people deeper into subservience.¹⁰⁷

Such a biased values system will play an important role in our study, especially as we consider how a Roman elite in the Lukan community, sharing some or all of these values, might react to the gospel. Kautsky makes the interesting observation that “ethical” religions like Christianity and Islam have to forsake some of that character when they are adopted by aristocrats, who must conquer and dominate others to keep their honor intact.¹⁰⁸ If Luke really was an attempt to reconcile Rome and Christ,¹⁰⁹ we might expect to see examples of such accommodations. Instead, however, the third evangelist and the characters in his narrative make bold claims of justice and of good news for the poor and oppressed (for example, Luke 4:16-21). Such declarations of God’s favor for peasant girls like Mary (1:28-33, 42-45, 47-49) and hungry beggars like Lazarus (16:22, 25) surely struck a discordant note for elites whose daily lives and culture were designed to testify to their superiority. Jesus, in seeming agreement with standard aristocratic practice, maintains that excess wealth should indeed be spent rather than hoarded (Luke 12:13-21); but his suggested outlets for all that surplus extracted from the peasants were not servants, military campaigns, and other conspicuous luxuries. Rather, in a turn that must have been shocking to elite ears, he advocated “consuming” one’s resources by sharing them with others, especially the poor who cannot reciprocate (an idea Kautsky calls entirely unthinkable and untenable in an aristocratic worldview¹¹⁰). For Jesus, extreme charity becomes an alternate way of “displaying” one’s wealth in accordance with one’s spiritual faith. Even more shockingly, all who want to follow Jesus are to engage in this alternate form of benefaction, not only the elite (see, for example, Luke 6:27-36; 14:7-14). As we shall clearly see in the following chapters, the Lukan theme of status reversal quickly redefines the ideals of service, honor, and glory so central to the elite value system.

Finally, a word is needed about Kautsky’s treatment of the other 90 percent (or more) of the population in an aristocratic empire: peasants, merchants, and townspeople. In this area, his assessment suffers greatly from a limited view of how deeply peasants, slaves, and other non-elites are able to think, feel, and imagine. Peasants, in his estimation, are accustomed to paying taxes and so care little for where such taxes go, especially if compliance allows them to live in

107. Garnsey and Saller, *Roman Empire*, 111, 118.

108. Kautsky, *Politics*, 177.

109. See the discussion in the introduction above.

110. Kautsky, *Politics*, 193-94.

peace.¹¹¹ He makes the common argument (strongly refuted by Scott's model, discussed below) that aristocrats and peasants live entirely separate from each other, that they cannot imagine life any other way, and that neither group, therefore, has the inclination to change or agitate against the system. While there is some truth in the vast divide between elites and non-elites and the longevity of many aristocratic empires (whether traditional or commercialized), Kautsky's dismissal of conflict between elite and non-elite in "pure" aristocratic economies is too quick. His argument that most "class conflict" is due to commercialization and thus diluting of the "pure" model is not convincing. The status reversal imagery found not only in the New Testament but also throughout ancient (as well as modern) literature makes it clear that non-elites can indeed imagine themselves living a better life, no matter how far removed they may be from those ruling over them. They may be nearly powerless, but they can and do find ways to seek change within the system. Even Kautsky acknowledges that, at the least, they protest new or sudden increases in tax or labor demands¹¹² and attempt to use cunning to withhold part of their produce.¹¹³

Non-elites also learn the power of community and seize any opportunity for change that presents itself. Kautsky notes that an increase in commercialization can create an environment ripe for peasant revolt and social change: merchants serve as an example of non-elites improving their situation, and also provide a market where peasants could spend surplus resources to enhance their own quality of life.¹¹⁴ The critical mass of townspeople (anyone not peasant or aristocratic) also increases along with commercialization, and Kautsky's model greatly underestimates the influence of this group. He observes correctly that the townspeople were much more varied in occupation and lifestyle than either the peasant or the aristocrat, interacted with a wider range of people, and thus had a broader intellectual horizon than most peasants. But contrary to his assertion, it does not automatically follow that they also lacked a central ideology and identity.¹¹⁵ Merchants, artisans, and sometimes even thieves often organized themselves in some way. Craftspeople and vendors would come together to form guilds, which provided not only training, work standards, and insurance for members' widows and orphans, but also, and more importantly, a sense of community and voice, and a political arena

111. *Ibid.*, 73, 252–53.

112. *Ibid.*, 308.

113. *Ibid.*, 275.

114. *Ibid.*, 289–90.

115. *Ibid.*, 330–31.

separate from that of the aristocrats.¹¹⁶ Called *collegia* in the Roman world, such associations were available only to those non-elites with enough status and resources to afford the entry fees, and the elites were able to maintain some control of them through benefaction.¹¹⁷ The coexisting independence and mimicry of the Roman *collegia* is important to note. These associations made elites nervous about their potential to turn revolutionary.¹¹⁸ But at the same time, their members aped elite hierarchy and did not seek practical material benefits like holidays or lower taxes, but instead lobbied for a modest level of elite values, such as public honor and social prestige.¹¹⁹ *Collegia* were an important beginning place, even with their ambivalence toward elite Roman values, for movements of social change, such as the early Jesus movement and others, to gain a foothold and some momentum to orchestrate social change beneficial to both peasants and townspeople, and perhaps even to the elites as well. For more in-depth exploration of this most important area, then, we must turn to the work of James Scott.

JAMES C. SCOTT AND HIDDEN RESISTANCE

Sociology and anthropology have generally paid attention only to open rebellion and armed revolt on the part of subordinated peoples; if these are not present, the people are assumed to be passive and accepting of their domination.¹²⁰ James C. Scott, however, takes issue with this conclusion and offers a cogent counterargument in his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Through a historical comparison of subordinated groups like African-American slaves, peasants from various times and places, the Indian caste system, and others, Scott shows that multiple layers lie between the extremes of unquestioning submission and military revolt. Within these intermediate gray areas, the dominated are well able to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo in which they live. This, we shall see, is the type of resistance that we find in several different forms in the Gospel of Luke.

116. Ibid., 333–34.

117. Toner, *Popular Culture*, 109; Whittaker, “The Poor,” 287.

118. Toner, *Popular Culture*, 107–8.

119. MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 74–75; and Toner, *Popular Culture*, 108.

120. E.g., the exclusive focus of Stephen L. Dyson on military revolts in his two articles: “Native Revolts in the Roman Empire,” 239–74; and “Native Revolt Patterns in the Roman Empire,” in *ANRW* 2.3, ed. Joseph Vogt, Hildegard Temporini, and Wolfgang Haase (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1975), 138–75. For an example in biblical studies, see Kim, *Christ and Caesar*; he concludes that since the Lukan Jesus does not advocate an overthrow of Roman rule (95), complete submission with no alteration of existing political, social, or economic structures is the only alternative (114, 123).