PAUL AND THE “SOCIAL RELATIONS” OF DEATH AT ROME
(ROMANS 5:14, 17, 21)

James R. Harrison
Wesley Institute, Sydney, Australia

A Neglected Area of Research in the Epistle to the Romans:
The “Social Relations” of Death at Rome

The Neronian “Reign of Death” and Romans Studies

Recently there has been an explosion of research into social relations at Rome that has escaped the notice of exegetes of Romans. Publications on the impact of death at Rome have increased exponentially in the last decade as ancient historians have explored how Romans of differing social status faced, experienced, and interpreted death within the hierarchical and competitive society of late republican and early imperial times. This lack of interest in (what might be called) the “social relations” of death at Rome on the part of New Testament scholars is a lacuna in modern

---

biblical scholarship, given the growth industry that studies on death at Rome has become. The omission is perfectly understandable at one level. Exegetes have concentrated their energies in discussing death as one of the cosmic powers ranged against humankind, unfolding its reign against the backdrop of Second Temple Judaism, the martyrological exempla of antiquity, and the philosophical traditions of the late Hellenistic age. But the failure of exegetes to appreciate that there was a “culture of death” present in imperial Rome has important consequences for our understanding of Romans. Paul often speaks of death in social contexts as much as in theological contexts. The evidence of the Corinthian epistles, for example, is incontrovertible in this regard (1 Cor 1:18–32; 2:8; 4:9–13; 11:27–30 [cf. vv. 17–22]; 2 Cor 2:14–16 [cf. 4:8–12]; 6:8–10; 11:21b-33; 13:4). Is there any indication that Paul operates in a similar manner in the epistle to the Romans? If Paul has so carefully shaped a new vision of social relations through the “dying and rising” motif at the Roman colony of Corinth, surely he would have

---


