

Empire Criticism of the New Testament

Edited by
CHRISTOPH HEILIG

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament
550*

Mohr Siebeck

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

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550



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New Approaches

Edited by
Christoph Heilig

Mohr Siebeck

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ISBN 978-3-16-164388-0 / eISBN 978-3-16-164389-7
DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-164389-7

ISSN 0512-1604 / eISSN 2568-7476
(Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available at <https://dnb.dnb.de>.

Published by Mohr Siebeck Tübingen 2025

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Printed on non-aging paper. Typesetting: Martin Fischer, Tübingen.

Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG, Wilhelmstraße 18, 72074 Tübingen, Germany
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Empire Criticism

From the Golden Age of Caesar to the Age of Artificial Intelligence

What did the first Christians think about the Roman Empire? Did they accept its claim to power, differentiating perhaps between a political sphere in which Caesar ruled and a spiritual sphere in which loyalty was due to Christ? Or were they critical of Rome's aspirations, perceiving a conflict between the gospel that they had received on the one hand and Roman ideology that they were confronted with on a daily basis?

It is sometimes suggested that older New Testament scholarship – dominated by, among other things, a Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms – uncritically and without exception or qualification accepted the former assumption. That is just as unfair as insinuations that proponents of the second opinion are simply motivated by leftist ideologies and not interested in the historical realities.

Still, it remains true that the 1990s saw increased interest in how the earliest Christians interacted with Roman rule in their day and a greater openness to finding criticism of imperial ideology in their writings. Both the way in which these scholars have emphasized the originality of their approach and the critique with which they have been met by those who disagree with them justify treating them as a distinct movement within New Testament scholarship.

A Paradigm in Transition

A history of research on this paradigm remains to be written. What proponents of this approach themselves offer is usually not much more than an account of the individual genealogy of influence – explaining merely the respective idiosyncrasies of their own approaches.¹ An account of how these explicit references to previous research explain certain instances of narrowed perspectives and an overview of what holds them together remains a lacuna that I hope will be closed soon (by someone else). In this introduction, I want to focus on the future of said paradigm – and how I hope the present volume will positively shape its devel-

¹ This is also true for me. See Christoph Heilig, *Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul*, WUNT II 392 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015; 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 21–24, and Christoph Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire: Paul's Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome*, with a foreword by John M. G. Barclay (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), chapter 1.

opment. I will refrain from summarizing the individual contributions in this book, as I believe their titles are already self-explanatory. Rather, I want to explain my own personal motivation for launching this project (which may or may not be shared by the other authors!) and what kind of impact I hope it will have.

So, what about the future of the quest for an early Christianity that was critical of the Roman Empire? Is it just a passing fad? Some speculated at the turn of the millennium that the entire paradigm would lose steam after the end of the Bush administration.² This does indeed seem to have been the case. However, it must be emphasized that the relative scarcity of new analyses pushing the paradigm forward has set in not *because* of a lack of modern authoritarianism that left-leaning scholars might be opposed to but *despite* imperial aspirations of modern superpowers arguably being even more on our minds in recent years than ever! To me, this suggests that the entire line of inquiry has always been more than just a research program built on a political agenda. More importantly, I think it implies that the decline in interest – which I personally think is real and which I don't want to deny – needs to be explained by other factors.

The Challenge of Methodological Rigor

In my view, the decisive factor in this development is best summarized by the title of a review article that was published just one week before I sat down to write this introduction and that, focusing on Paul, emphasizes the “methodological rigour” required in studies of how the apostle and his readers “related to imperial power.”³

To be sure, said methodological rigor can certainly be a deterrent to early-career researchers entering the field – in a dual sense. To begin with, having the impression that one first has to battle through a mountain of theoretical secondary literature, full of contradictory views, before one can even begin to analyze the primary texts, isn't particularly attractive. This does not mean, however, that

² I see this tendency of associating anti-imperial readings of the New Testament with resistance toward specific manifestations of US politics in, for example, Denny Burk, “Is Paul’s Gospel Counterimperial? Evaluating the Prospects of the ‘Fresh Perspective’ for Evangelical Theology,” *JETS* 51 (2008): 309–37, and Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). By contrast, see Joel R. White, “Anti-Imperial Subtexts in Paul: An Attempt at Building a Firmer Foundation.” *Bib* 90 (2009): 305. He entertains this framing but correctly thinks the paradigm would endure. However, the reason he adduces for this optimism is that in his view the paradigm works with a very wide notion of empire. I, by contrast, am of the opinion that we don't need such abstract notions of empire for us in the present to be interested in “imperialism” – rather, we are confronted at the moment with pretty concrete contours of actual empires, which makes the issue pressing to us, in its highly specific form!

³ Jonathon Lookadoo, “Methodological Rigour in Studies of How Paul and His Readers Related to Imperial Power,” *Review in Religion & Theology* 32 (2025): 86–92.

this methodological discourse should simply be bypassed. Such a short-term fix also leads to a stalemate quickly within the field, namely once different opinions on the meaning of the texts have been articulated and there is no common framework to evaluate such proposals.⁴ Then, junior researchers are faced with the equally off-putting impression that there is just a dichotomy of positions to deal with, no real conversation to enter.

To be sure, simple matters might benefit from simple approaches; methodological discussions for their own sake are just as counterproductive. But I am of the opinion that the last three decades have clearly shown that the question of how the first Christians related to the Roman Empire is *not* such a simple issue. The truth is that from the perspective of the earliest followers of Christ, the Roman Empire did not (as some overly enthusiastic proponents of empire criticism might have suggested) appear as a clearly demarcated external force, a foe with clear contours that early Christians opposed persistently and above all else. Rather, it was a power structure that permeated every aspect of their lives – including their own self-identification. Identifying critiques of this empire is, therefore, necessarily a complicated matter, a constantly negotiated compromise at the very heart of each individual and community, an issue that, hence, needs to be approached with nuance, surgical precision – and, thus, methodological sophistication.

For this very same reason, however, because the Romanness of early Christianity is deeply embedded in its identity, the question of how early Christians reacted to aspects of Roman ideology is of vital importance in my opinion and cannot simply be pushed aside because of the tedious preparatory work that it requires. When we understand how the early Christians navigated their existence in the Roman Empire, we understand something about the very essence of these individuals and communities – and if we don't, we thus miss something important.

The Present Volume: Aims and Approach

This double conviction – of both the importance and the complexity of the issue – is the main impetus behind the present volume. It goes back to many conversations with scholars working on these questions, particularly as part of our unofficial “Early Christianity and Empire” group that regularly meets and discusses these matters during the annual SBL meetings. What I have personally noticed in these debates is that while the participants disagree, often widely, with respect to the extent to which New Testament writers did in fact criticize the

⁴ This has happened, in my view, to the narrative approach to Paul. See Christoph Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller: A Narratological Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024).

Roman Empire, we all agree that there is a lot of material that has not yet been properly analyzed – that deserves a fair assessment and that, for that purpose, requires a broad array of up-to-date methodological tools. It has thus been my wish for the last couple of years to assemble a group of experts who could explain what kinds of insights their specific approach to these ancient texts might yield regarding the critical interaction of early Christians with their Roman context.

New Perspectives

This volume is the result of this desire. All authors are experts on the specific approach that they introduce and each of these approaches brings a fresh impetus to the current debate. They shed light on different facets of early Christian-Roman interaction, sometimes illuminating the same areas, but from a different angle, sometimes emphasizing the need to pay attention to parameters that might be missed from other vantage points.

It should go without saying that the multiperspectival nature of our approach implies from the outset that the selection of approaches investigated here cannot be exhaustive.⁵ Each of them is, however, a rather obvious candidate for one of several considerations that might be heuristically helpful to have in mind when examining potential critiques of Rome in early Christian texts.⁶

I intentionally designate these approaches “new” in the subtitle of this volume because I am of the conviction that none of them has received sufficient attention yet in the debate about whether and to what extent New Testament writers did in fact criticize the Roman Empire.⁷ While some approaches have become more common practice in New Testament studies in general (such as the incorporation of papyrological evidence, to pick just one example), the actual evidential weight

⁵ On the contrary, re-reading the volume as a whole in order to prepare the indices I have already come to see new areas that would deserve attention. To give just one example, I noticed there is a constant interplay of emphases on rational motives and emotionally driven decisions. I am glad to see – already having hinted myself at the possibility that Paul might have made some critical, rather unwise remarks, in the heat of the moment (Heilig, *Apostle*, 32–39 and 98–100) – that with contributions such as Nils Neumann’s focus on historical psychology, this latter dimension is coming into view more directly. At the same time, it seems to me now that in the future we might need more precise tools to evaluate the rational component of early Christian interaction with the Roman sphere. Game theory is an obvious and in New Testament studies in general largely neglected option. Joel R. White, “Philemon, Game Theory, and the Reconfiguration of Household Relationships,” *EuroJTh* 26 (2017): 32–42, is the exception.

⁶ I intentionally speak of early Christian texts in general here. This volume focuses explicitly on canonical writings because this is the common denominator of New Testament (and Early Christian) studies on an international level, especially if one takes on a pedagogical perspective (see below). Of course, widening a perspective beyond canonical material will be a crucial next step.

⁷ Some of these emphases correspond with what I identified as, back then, current blind spots in empire criticism in Heilig, *Apostle*, chapter 5. Many have not been on my radar until I got convinced of their potential by others.

that the evidence in question has been allowed so far in empire criticism remains marginal. Admittedly, some categories – such as James C. Scott’s “hidden transcript” – have, in fact, been invoked for decades in debates about the New Testament and empire – but still we are far from even having established a kind of methodological consensus that could simply be adopted, for example by doctoral students who focus on specific texts and who might want to simply apply an existing framework. The very fact that we are still debating the most fundamental questions of how these categories might apply to our texts demonstrates that we need more methodological discussion on these matters, not less.

The idea behind this volume is that each chapter opens up a perspective on the text that seems promising with respect to illuminating individual aspects of Christian-Roman interaction. I am very excited about the result in that I believe that some new and fundamental insights have been achieved in these contributions. I thus hope that the volume will be an eye-opener to many, demonstrating the riches that can still be discovered by an empire-critical analysis of early Christian texts.

And I want to emphasize that this focus on actual *texts* is just as important for this volume as the plea for methodological rigor. Of course, the proof is in the pudding! By no means is this volume intended to offer “a new method,” as if the authors sat together to devise a singular approach to uncovering critiques of the Roman Empire. It is also not, as one might assume perhaps, simply an overview of a variety of methods that are introduced for their own sake, a kind of template that may or may not have heuristic potential but that is introduced simply to do justice to the fact that it is a theoretical approach that exists out there, perhaps in a neighboring discipline. Rather, each and every contribution must be judged by the extent to which it opens up new ground, allows for new insights, and connects previously disconnected elements in the text. Personally, I am of the opinion that they all greatly enhance our understanding of early Christianity in its Roman context and I am particularly grateful to many of the contributors trying to connect their approach to those of others, noting potential synergies and tensions so that every reader can decide for themselves which aspect they want to incorporate in their own reconstruction of Christian-Roman relations during the time of the composition of the New Testament.

Deepening the Conversation

Before I come to the actual layout of the book, I need to demarcate it from another type of edited volume that has become quite popular with respect to the topic of Empire. The fundamental volumes on Empire in the 1990s were followed by a multitude of projects in the 2000s and 2010s that brought together different authors to discuss how specific New Testament texts relate to Roman ideology. As I have explained in much more detail elsewhere, I find that genre

to be quite problematic.⁸ My opinion is that it has cultivated something like a pseudo-discourse. Often, experts on specific New Testament writings are asked to comment on the dimension of the Roman Empire, even though – or even because – they have not yet dealt extensively with this aspect in their writing before. This certainly is attractive in that it could provide a kind of outsider perspective on what might just be a fad. However, it also means that fundamental methodological considerations are regularly missed and that the same kinds of mistakes are repeated over and over again. This can also happen when the seemingly opposite approach is taken and one and the same “empire expert” is asked time and again to cover a certain canonical writing. A certain academic monoculture develops that has the same end result. For in both cases, we can witness a narrowing of perspective that excludes many potentially valid considerations. And as soon as one such voice has spoken on the issue, it becomes the new point of departure for the next contribution on the topic – often in a volume of the same kind. After just a couple of rounds, this creates the illusion of something like a consensus or at least a clearly demarcated area of debate. And doctoral students who then approach a topic related to Empire and the New Testament will take this extremely thin discourse as the point of departure for their own analysis, thus further perpetuating the narrowing of perspective. I think we are simply not yet in the position to produce overviews of that kind that could summarize substantial debates and synthesize areas of consensus. I am convinced that, ironically, by focusing first on methodological basics, this volume brings many new texts into view that have not yet featured in the debate, thus actually broadening the range of texts typically considered.

This volume also differs in another important way from the kinds of books that I have in mind. The goal behind some of those, including the classics from the 1990s, was to establish a certain position on the matter – either in terms of making a case for anti-imperial Christians or with the purpose in mind of exposing the entire paradigm as a leftist enterprise. Importantly, trying from the outset to establish some “middle ground” isn’t neutral either!⁹ By contrast, one of the benefits of approaching the question of anti-imperialism in the New Testament from a limited, specialized perspective is that it provides a high-resolution picture that will inevitably come with nuance. All authors in this volume, even those who have a lot of critical things to say about publications classically associated with anti-imperial readings, will admit that there is something there in these texts that under certain conditions could constitute some kind of critique of Rome and that needs to be taken seriously and analyzed properly. And all those

⁸ Christoph Heilig, “Das Neue Testament im Schatten des Imperiums,” *VF* 68 (2023): 14–30.

⁹ Cf. already Heilig, *Hidden Criticism*, 23, on Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, eds., *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013).

of us who find a lot of critique of Rome are, in turn, faced with the recognition that the Roman realm penetrates early Christian discourse in many forms and that it would be reductionistic to think about this interaction merely in terms of opposition or resistance.

The volume is thus intentionally not called “Empire Criticism *in* the New Testament” (even though this was the working title in the beginning), but “Empire Criticism *of* the New Testament,” to do justice to the fact that Christian-Roman interactions are as complex as their analysis is important. The task is to identify the many ways in which the Roman Empire had an impact on text production in early Christianity, with critique of Rome ending up in the text (or subtext) being one of several possible manifestations.

Moreover, looking so much for critique, many of us do identify critical remarks in New Testament texts – but more than once we are forced to recognize that it is not Rome – or not just Rome, or not primarily Rome – that constitutes the opponent in question. Similarly, we sometimes notice that there is in fact a critique of Rome – but that the method in question only identifies it in *other* texts that we look at for comparison, while failing to identify the same phenomena in the New Testament corpus (or at least yielding less likely results there). What our essays thus offer is both a network (Christian critique of Rome in relation to Christian critiques of *other* entities and *non-Christian* critiques of Rome) and a spectrum of plausibility for specific texts. The goal is to enable readers to apply this framework themselves to the same or similar texts – and depending on their individual presuppositions they might come to different conclusions, might land on a different spot on the spectrum of how likely the identification of a critique of Rome is for any given New Testament passage.¹⁰

Structure and Organization

The way that this volume is designed is that it begins with approaches that are focused on language *per se* or at least fundamental categories of linguistic expression: stories, speech acts, semiotics, and metaphors. From there, we slowly move to more historically situated categories, from social identity to historical psychology, from an attempt to uncover “hidden transcripts” in early Christian communities to emic categories stemming from ancient rhetoric. Finally, we take into view four aspects of material culture: papyri, inscriptions, coinage, and iconography.

¹⁰ I have written in detail elsewhere about how different priors influence exegetical decisions. For a recent and accessible treatment, see my discussion in Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller*, 317–34 (on the example of alleged “narrative substructures”). The discussion in Theresa Heilig and Christoph Heilig, “Historical Methodology,” in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul: A Critical Examination of the Pauline Theology of N. T. Wright*, ed. Christoph Heilig, J. Thomas Hewitt, and Michael F. Bird, WUNT II/413 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016; 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 115–50, remains foundational.

Each author explains why in their view the respective approach has something new and relevant to offer to debates about the Roman Empire in New Testament texts. Note that even though their contributions often break new ground, they also aim to introduce their approach and the relevant terminology and literature. This makes the volume uniquely suitable as a textbook for advanced students, who will become familiar with important exegetical methods and at the same time will learn about one of the most pressing issues in the field. I am very happy that it was possible to make this book available in open access, thus greatly enhancing its accessibility to students.¹¹

I want to add a comment here on something the classicist Ulrike Roth has written in a review of one of my books on Paul and Empire.¹² There is little critique of my specific contribution in this review (to which I respond below, in my own chapter, on p. 33), but quite a blistering assessment of empire criticism and New Testament studies in general from the perspective of an informed outsider (she is an ancient historian who has also studied theology). As such, I think it gives us valuable feedback from a perspective that we as New Testament scholars should take very seriously. However, I was struck by one comment in particular, namely when she rejects my “call for more specialised commentaries or handbooks to provide the missing expertise.”¹³ (I was talking about works that make specialized approaches such as papyrology more accessible to the average New Testament scholar.) The rationale of her position is: “such research is widely published and accessible – requiring merely a preparedness to approach the ancient world holistically, rather than within a single scholarly niche.”¹⁴ While it might be true that it would be great if New Testament scholars did not need special introductions on how to apply papyrology, epigraphy, or numismatics – to name just a few areas – to their texts, the reality is simply that only very few scholars in our field have acquired the expertise to deal with these materials on a high level, and I therefore continue to be grateful to the efforts of these scholars to help those of us who have not developed the same skills to at least use these tools responsibly. And I do think that given how most New Testament scholars acquire their specific set of skills (this has to do with many factors, such as the incorporation of New Testament studies in wider theological programs – which, by the way, might come with additional competencies in other areas, easily over-

¹¹ The open access version of this book was made possible by a generous contribution of the LMU Open Access Fund. My own chapter was paid for by the “Elite Network of Bavaria” as part of the funding for my research group “Focalization in Early Christian Stories.” I am also thankful to my student assistant, Masahiro Kubota, for preparing the indices of authors and ancient sources for this volume.

¹² Ulrike Roth, review of *The Apostle and the Empire: Paul's Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome*, by Christoph Heilig, *JRS* 113 (2023): 214–16.

¹³ Roth, review of *The Apostle and the Empire*, 215.

¹⁴ Roth, review of *The Apostle and the Empire*, 215.

looked by philologists and historians; the institutional limitations of short PhD programs; etc.), there is no reason to suspect that this might change simply by telling early-career scholars that they should, in fact, know all of that anyway.

Future Horizons: Researching and Teaching Empire in the Age of AI

I make this point so emphatically because I believe that the pressures created by the advances in generative artificial intelligence will, in all likelihood, make it even *more* difficult to establish the kind of exhaustive philological education for biblical scholars that Roth seems to deem the norm. After all, it is becoming increasingly controversial whether teaching philological methods is of any worth at all!¹⁵ And I do believe that we need in fact to be realistic with respect to what kinds of tasks will become automatable in the very near future,¹⁶ which leads me to the opinion that this revolution will indeed fundamentally alter what it means to be a New Testament scholar.¹⁷

However, that being said, I also think that once we accept that studying these ancient texts is not just about the scholarly output that we may produce but also about the acquisition of cultural practices and the holistic formation of individuals, I believe that contributions like the present volume, which combine cutting-edge research with a specifically pedagogical outlook, will become more and more important. For they will help students to become critical thinkers – not for the sake of any specific text they might have to produce in individual jobs (such as a sermon as a pastor, or a commentary as a biblical scholar), but for the sake of developing their personalities.

This will require time, lots of time. But in an age when we become increasingly forced to relinquish established cultural practices that have shaped humanity for millennia, such as reading and writing, I believe a desire will develop to personally acquire these skills, regardless of whether a computer can also carry out the corresponding tasks. And perhaps we can then even establish an educational framework in which the breadth and depth of education of biblical scholars matches the, no doubt desirable, utopia that Roth thinks should be reality. In the meantime, we have to acknowledge that current curricula do not provide the necessary space. It is no wonder that students prefer to let ChatGPT read and

¹⁵ I am particularly occupied with these developments due to my role as a PI in the International Doctorate Program Philology at the University of Munich.

¹⁶ See Christoph Heilig, “Between Ancient Texts and Large Language Models: The Future of Pedagogy in Biblical Exegesis,” *VvAa – Forum Exegese und Hochschuldidaktik* (in press).

¹⁷ I feel that my long-standing aversion to the genre of the biblical commentary (cf., e.g., Heilig, *Apostle*, chapter 6, for a more recent critical analysis) is being clearly vindicated by these current trends.

write under these conditions. But I am optimistic that higher education in the humanities will at some point create the necessary context that will allow for slow reading, critical discussion, and honing writing skills – if only because otherwise no one will enroll anymore.

It is this outlook that makes the present project so important to me. It is an attempt to create something like a model for what scholarship might look like in the future, a textbook that can still motivate students because it (a) deals with a fascinating subject that can excite them to begin with and (b) goes beyond what a large language model could tell them – and not just as of now, but generally, namely by inviting them to enter an actual dialogue with human experts, to participate in a conversation that they can continue through their own thinking and writing, knowing that in doing so they will be embedded in a network of interpersonal communication, not just reworking impersonal text.

Christoph Heilig, Ulm, August 2025

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Narratology

Analyzing Subversive Counternarratives

Christoph Heilig

1 Narrative in Empire Criticism

In my opinion, the consideration of narrative dynamics deserves a central place in empire criticism.¹ This is true for several reasons, the first of which is that the quest for traces of early Christian negotiation of Roman imperial ideology has been marked from the beginning by an – at least implicit – understanding of the fact that many of the texts (or text parts) in question are narrative and that this characteristic is indeed vital for their supposed imperial-critical function.

This becomes obvious, for example, in the contribution of N. T. Wright, who in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* first sketches Paul's Roman background in terms of a salvific history² and then contrasts Paul's narrative worldview with this sketch,³ arguing not only for tensions between these different stories of the world but also maintaining that Paul would have been aware of this narrative incompatibility: "As Paul told and retold the long story of the creator God and his chosen people, reaching its shocking climax in the crucified Messiah, he can hardly have been unaware ..., of the powerful alternative narrative that Rome was offering to the world."⁴ Accordingly, it is not surprising that his analysis of passages such as Phil 2:6–11 then takes on a decidedly narrative tone – according to Wright, there the "story of Jesus" is told in a way "so that it echoes and upstages the story of Caesar."⁵

In *Hidden Criticism?* (finalized just when Wright's *magnum opus* appeared in print), I argued that this *narrative* character of the alleged implicit criticism of Rome in Paul's letters held the potential to add plausibility to the claim that we can identify an anti-imperial sentiment "between the lines" of the text. While I

¹ This article is part of my wider research on early Christian narratives, funded by the Elite Network of Bavaria. I am grateful for Dr. Ellen Howard, who is part of this research team, for providing feedback on this article.

² N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 4 (London: SPCK, 2013), 279–347. Note, for example, the section on "The Climax of the Narrative" (pp. 298–321).

³ Wright, *Faithfulness*, 1271–1319.

⁴ Wright, *Faithfulness*, 1282.

⁵ Wright, *Faithfulness*, 1249.

was skeptical that Paul would have hidden his critical remarks in the subtext *in order* to avoid persecution.⁶ I was wondering why we would view the subtext as a kind of second-rate medium in the first place, a communicative choice that would require an elaborate justification. By contrast, it seemed to me that less direct attacks at the Roman realm might ultimately have been rhetorically more effective for Paul than outright, in-your-face claims – especially if we assume that his comments were also meant to *persuade* his audience, away from placing trust in the Emperor as a source of salvation, away from societal structures outside the church that Paul might have seen standing in conflict with the gospel.⁷

Others have agreed with this suggestion to at least some extent. For example, Michael F. Bird concludes in *An Anomalous Jew* that “[a]nyone vaguely familiar with the Roman imperium could see Paul articulating the vision of an alternative empire. It is not simply the parallel terminology that Paul uses like κύριος or εὐαγγέλιον, but the apocalyptic and messianic narrative that such language is couched in that makes it tacitly counterimperial.”⁸ And others, such as Laura J. Hunt with respect to the Gospel of John and Justin Winzenburg with respect to Ephesians, have incorporated a focus on this narrative dimension as at least a central element alongside other considerations.⁹

2 A Narratological Perspective

Generally, however, I admit that so far the explication of what it might mean for empire criticism to pay more attention to narrative details has remained rather limited. In part, this reluctance to explicitly focus on the aspect of narrativity in empire criticism can be explained by the fact that the debate continues to focus on the Apostle Paul.¹⁰ And if we assume that “Paul is simply not a storyteller” and that he “in his extant writings never actually tells a story” (with the exception

⁶ Though I am no longer that bullish on that point. Cf. now Christoph Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire: Paul’s Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome*, with a foreword by John M. G. Barclay (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022).

⁷ Christoph Heilig, *Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul*, WUNT 392 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015; 2nd ed., Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 136–38.

⁸ Michael F. Bird, *An Anomalous Jew: Paul among Jews, Greeks, and Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 254.

⁹ Laura J. Hunt, *Jesus Caesar: A Roman Reading of the Johannine Trial Narrative*, WUNT II/506 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019) and Justin Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire: An Evaluation of the Epistle’s Subversion of Roman Imperial Ideology*, WUNT II/573 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

¹⁰ Cf., e.g., Laura Robinson, “Hidden Transcripts? The Supposedly Self-Censoring Paul and Rome as Surveillance State in Modern Pauline Scholarship,” *NTS* 67 (2021): 55–72, for an update on the argument made by John M. G. Barclay, “Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul,” in *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, ed. John M. G. Barclay, WUNT 275 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 363–87.

of Gal 1–2),¹¹ why then should one burden an already controversial position by invoking categories that might cause it to appear even more obscure?

Moreover, while “narrative criticism” has, in fact, become commonplace in NT studies with respect to the Gospels, it remains also true that the discourse as a whole still lags behind several decades with respect to where narratologists currently are.¹² Lack of methodological clarity in analyzing stories in general naturally carries over into an insecurity with respect to how to apply these tools to narratives that might be anti-imperial.

However, since it can be demonstrated that Paul *is* in fact a talented storyteller who makes use of narratives in many different ways,¹³ and since it can likewise be shown that exegetical discussions *do*, in fact, benefit immensely from taking into account current narratological research,¹⁴ I think it is prudent to come back to the question of whether understanding early Christian comments in their Roman context *as* narratives is heuristically beneficial for empire criticism.

2.1 Counternarratives

This conviction that narratology holds a lot of promise for biblical exegesis in general forms the backbone of my second argument why empire criticism should focus on narrative concerns. It can be strengthened, however, even further, if we consider specific narratological categories. The most obvious one is the one of “counternarratives.” There is currently a rich and growing discourse on such narratives, stories that are told to resist or challenge dominant social narratives and power structures, often revealing marginalized perspectives and alternative interpretations of social reality.¹⁵

¹¹ Francis C. Watson, “Is There a Story in These Texts?” in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 232 and 239.

¹² Moisés Mayordomo, “Exegese zwischen Geschichte, Text und Rezeption: Literaturwissenschaftliche Zugänge zum Neuen Testament,” VF 55 (2010): 19–37. See also Sönke Finner, *Narratologie und biblische Exegese: Eine integrative Methode der Erzählanalyse und ihr Ertrag am Beispiel von Matthäus 28*, WUNT II/285 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), and Jan Rüggemeier, *Poetik der markinischen Christologie: Eine kognitiv-narratologische Exegese*, WUNT II/458 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017). Even though I don’t agree with their framework of cognitive narratology, they have to be credited with elevating the discourse to a new level.

¹³ Christoph Heilig, *Paulus als Erzähler? Eine narratologische Perspektive auf die Paulusbriefe*, BZNW 237 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), and Christoph Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller: A Narratological Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024).

¹⁴ Christoph Heilig, *Just a Matter of Perspective? Focalization in Early Christian Stories* (Habilitationsschrift, University of Basel, 2024; planned publication: WUNT I, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2026).

¹⁵ For a recent definition, see Klarissa Lueg, Ann Starbæk Bager, and Marianne Wolff Lundholt, “Introduction: What Counter-Narratives Are: Dimensions and Levels of a Theory of Middle Range,” in *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*, ed. Klarissa Lueg and Marianne Wolff Lundholt (London: Routledge, 2021), 4.

Obviously, approaching early Christian reactions to Roman ideology through the lens of counternarratives holds promise considering the above-mentioned fact that these reactions seem to be characterized, at least in part, by their narrativity. There are, however, several more specific advantages to such an approach that I want to mention shortly.

As Klarissa Lueg, Ann Starbæk Bager, and Marianne Wolff Lundholt argue, counternarratives can be understood as a “theory of middle range”¹⁶ – positioned between grand theoretical assumptions about narrative as a fundamental mode of human sense-making and concrete empirical analysis. This theoretical status allows counternarratives to function as a bridging concept that connects larger social and political dynamics on the one hand with specific textual manifestations on the other hand. Focusing on counternarratives with such a conceptualization in mind has several implications.

First of all, this means that empire-critical analyses of early Christian texts in terms of counternarratives have the potential of *contributing to larger discussions* about the negotiation of power dynamics. Biblical studies are in this way offered a chance (one that they should appreciate, in my opinion!) to reinforce the case that they are an essential voice within the humanities. This relates to very broad-sweeping discussions about negotiating power in general, but also to discussions of more limited scope, such as the place of marginalized groups within the Roman Empire.

One mid-term goal thus must be to take into consideration early Christian counternarratives to dominant Roman ones alongside similar counternarratives by *other* marginalized groups.¹⁷ One of the reasons why the study of these ancient texts remains so important is because they offer us a rather rare window into how minorities, as minorities, dealt with Roman rule during the early principate.¹⁸

Second, however, it is likewise to be expected that there will be a *downstream effect* from this interdisciplinary dialogue that can enrich NT studies. Looking at early Christian texts as testaments of an oppressed group next to others as *one* among several valid lines of inquiry does not diminish their value but, rather, sheds new light on these texts in a way that also enriches their study as testaments of the emerging Christian faith. For as recent research has shown, we learn most about the situation of early Christians under Roman rule if we do not focus on them primarily as Christians but as one minority among many.¹⁹

¹⁶ Lueg, Bager, and Lundholt, “Introduction,” 4–5, citing Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, rev. and enl. ed. (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957).

¹⁷ See Tim Whitmarsh, “Resistance is Futile? Greek Literary Tactics in the Face of Rome,” in *Les Grecs héritiers des Romains*, ed. Paul Schubert, *Entretiens sur l’Antiquité classique* 59 (Geneva: Hardt Foundation, 2013), 57–78, for Greek literature under Roman rule.

¹⁸ On this entire line of inquiry, see James Corke-Webster, “Trouble in Pontus: The Pliny-Trajan Correspondence on the Christians Reconsidered,” *TAPA* 147 (2017): 371–411, and my attempts to build on his research in Heilig, *Apostle*, chapter 1.

¹⁹ Corke-Webster, “Trouble,” 406.

Most importantly, looking at early Christian anti-imperial counternarratives against the broader backdrop of counternarratives in general has the potential of managing our expectations in a healthy way, namely by sensitizing us to the *variegated kinds* of counternarratives that are possible, which will prevent us from interpreting early Christian stories monolithically against the backdrop of the Roman Empire. When emphasizing this necessity of nuance, I have in particular two parameters in mind, which I want to explicate shortly in what follows.

First, I think we need to carefully analyze the *pragmatics* of these stories. Even if they somehow deal with the “topic” of Rome, it is by no means clear that they are, for example, addressed *to* the elites²⁰ – nor that they, to choose the opposite of the spectrum, reflect a kind of unfiltered internal storytelling with simply consoling function.²¹

The history of research in empire criticism should come as a warning sign to us in this respect. Especially concerning the notion of “hidden transcripts” (cf. also Laura Robinson in this volume), it can be seen that early research on empire criticism in early Christianity was marked by assumptions rather than careful consideration of the theoretically existing options. Ironically, one party (consisting of both proponents and critics of the approach!) believed Paul’s letters to be entirely *private* and, thus, “hidden transcripts in pure form.” At the same time, others (again, both scholars sympathetic and antipathetic to anti-imperial readings of the NT!) assumed the opposite idea of them constituting “hidden transcripts in veiled form” that infiltrated the *public* sphere.²² Interpreting early Christian narratives as counternarratives gives us a chance to learn early on from the variegated nature of such stories in other contexts. I will explicitly return to this parameter later.

Second, I am convinced that keeping an eye on the transdisciplinary discourse on counternarratives will also teach us that there is not just *one* kind of counternarrative within any group that we would characterize generally as “oppressed” – because there is never just one hierarchical societal relationship that is determinative for the individuals in these groups. While in what follows I will focus on stories that I perceive to indeed critically interact with dominating narratives *from the Roman imperial realm*, I want to mark something here

²⁰ Such as the narrative portions in the original interaction between Jesus and Pilate (as renarrated for a *different* audience in Matt 27:11–14, Mark 15:2–5, Luke 23:3–4, and John 18:28–38; cf. the ὄμολογία in 1 Tim 6:13) and Paul’s appearance before Roman governors in threatening situations (handed down to us again only in a *secondary* reception context in Acts 18:12–17, 24:10–21, 25:8–12, 26:1–29).

²¹ There *are* such narratives, with different topics, such as 1 Thess 4:13–18 (though we are dealing here, strictly speaking, with a “protonarrative,” because it is predictively narrated, i.e., relates to the future: cf. Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller*, 188).

²² Cf. Heilig, *Hidden Criticism?*, chapter 2.

at the outset that also plays an important role in many of the other essays: The dynamics that I investigate here with respect to the Roman Empire could – and, often, should! – also be scrutinized on other fronts that early Christians dealt with in their daily lives.

Most obviously, this includes power dynamics vis-à-vis non-Roman outsiders. The Roman front was of course not the only frontier that early Christians, viewed as a unity, had to deal with during the time of the composition of the NT. Many of the controversies surrounding the adaptation of pagan motifs in early Christian writings can be understood along the lines of counternarratives.²³ With respect to attempts of othering Jews – as “the Jews” in general, or, a certain, other, kind of “real” Judaism – we likewise encounter the situation where stories from the Hebrew Bible and associated traditions are retold in different ways by contemporary Jews and followers of the Messiah Jesus.²⁴

At the same time, we must reckon with counternarratives that reflect the negotiation of *internal* hierarchies. For example, the thesis by Antoinette Wire, espoused in *The Corinthian Women Prophets*,²⁵ that women’s prophetic activities in Corinth disrupted male-dominated power structures within the church, could be analyzed along such lines. Paul’s responses, such as requiring head coverings (1 Corinthians 11) or silencing women in assemblies (1 Corinthians 14), are said to reflect his attempts to regulate these practices and reassert order. The stories that these prophets would have told about their own identity and how they came to the place in the church that they think they are meant to occupy could arguably be construed precisely in terms of a counternarrative to a dominating male narrative that Paul ultimately adopts and retells. Similarly, Dale Martin, in *The*

²³ For example, see Peter Wick, “Jesus gegen Dionysos? Ein Beitrag zur Kontextualisierung des Johannesevangeliums,” *Bib* 85 (2004): 179–98, on an interpretation of the Gospel of John as a counternarrative to the myth of Dionysos. Note how he comes close to the notion of counternarratives in his conclusions but then shifts the terminology to “argumentation: “Die parallelisierende und überbietende Gegenüberstellung von Jesus und dionysischen Motiven scheint tatsächlich eine Argumentationsstrategie zu sein, mit der der Evangelist arbeitet und die sich wie ein Netz über das ganze Evangelium ausbreitet” (p. 194). It seems to me that the notion of “persuasion” is more appropriate here. Persuasion and argumentation are not the same. The former has to do with text function, the latter with textualization strategy. In principle, they are independent. See Heilig, *Paul*, chapter 3.

²⁴ Though perhaps we need to be more careful to view renarrations in early Christian sources as mere reactions. Jonas Müller, *Mehr als eine Reaktion: Eine Untersuchung der Rolle Abrahams in der galatischen Auseinandersetzung und ihrer Plausibilität im frühjüdischen Abrahamsdiskurs* (PhD diss., University of Munich, 2025), now makes the case that it is Paul who introduced Abraham as a narrative character in Galatians because he can pick up elements within early Jewish discourse that fit his communicative goal. In other words, it is not the opponents who simply repeat a dominant (“the Jewish”) narrative, with Paul then being forced to produce a counternarrative.

²⁵ Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul’s Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

Corinthian Body,²⁶ examines how disputes over spiritual gifts mirrored social inequalities, with wealthier members asserting dominance. According to him, Paul's response, emphasizing the metaphor of the church as a unified body, seeks to reconcile these conflicts by assigning each individual a role within the community. However, Martin notes that this metaphor does not eliminate hierarchy but rather reinforces it in subtler ways by legitimizing a structured distribution of roles. In other words, we should not simplistically imagine Paul to have been only a man of the resistance, subverting dominating Roman stories by his counternarratives. Rather, we can assume him to have had some talent in that regard because we can see from other interactions that he was engaged in exercising power through storytelling himself.

I have made these quick side glances here to make the point that when dealing with early Christian texts we have to be open to the possibility that we are dealing with a variety of different kinds of counternarratives, on different levels, sometimes being told perhaps with even opposing interests. In the long-term, anti-imperial counternarratives must thus be placed in the context of other kinds of early Christian counternarratives. And once we broaden our perspective in such a way, we might learn something from how certain Christians opposed certain – not inherently imperial – power structures through storytelling, so that we can then come back to anti-imperial counternarratives with more nuanced categories. In the short-term, however, I do think that these foci on other kinds of power dynamics can be distracting. We can only focus on one thing at a time. And illuminating one controversial group interaction with another understudied one is not particularly helpful.²⁷ I view what follows thus as a very limited but also entirely appropriate first building block toward a much larger discourse that emerges on the horizon.

In closing this section, I must acknowledge that there are also methodological limitations that come with these suggested side-glances at other kinds of counternarratives. One is that the dominating non-Roman narratives within wider society as well as non-standard Christian counternarratives to which the canonical texts react are themselves often a matter of, mere, *reconstruction*, and, thus, prone to speculation. Moreover, it can certainly be debated whether the claims that these parties made about themselves were indeed presented in *narrative form* – instead of, for example, a rather *descriptive* account or presented as the result of an *argument*.²⁸ Thus there is certainly a danger of filtering entire power struggles through a narrative lens – which can result in fascinating stories

²⁶ Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

²⁷ See Christoph Heilig, “Das Neue Testament im Schatten des Imperiums,” VF 68 (*Neues Testament und Politik*, ed. Moisés Mayordomo) (2023): 27, on pieces such as Beth M. Sheppard, “The Gospel of John,” in *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Adam Winn, RBS 84 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016), 97–110.

²⁸ On narration as one of several different textualization strategies, see Heilig, *Paul*, 162–81.

... that, ultimately, are nothing but *our* narrativization about events in the past never conceptualized in narrative form by the people we talk about.²⁹ (What mitigates this problem at least to some extent is that often we can identify “proto-narratives” – potential, perhaps originally explicit – narratives as substructures undergirding descriptive or argumentative passages.³⁰) Lastly, it must of course be noted that the entire enterprise of analyzing human interaction *as* power struggle is itself not at all self-evident and involves many ideological presuppositions, at least when presupposed as an all-encompassing framework.³¹

2.2 Applying Narratological Categories as Heuristic Tools

The last section has delineated how the invocation of counternarratives as a mid-level theory offers lots of prospects with respect to developing empire criticism of the NT and other early Christian texts into a research field that can flourish in a *larger* transdisciplinary dialogue.

For the moment, however, we need to focus on the other direction, namely on the more specific theoretical framework and the methodological rules that govern the textual analysis on a *lower* level, on the level of actual textual analysis. After all, the notion of counternarratives does not, rightly understood, offer a fixed set of tools for empirical research. Rather, in order to be able to bridge the gulf between the texts in front of us and the discourse surrounding counternarratives on the other side, we need to integrate two aspects into our approach.

First, as the basis of our entire endeavor, we need a sound *theory of interpretation*³² in order to be able to give an account of what (it means to say that a text) “means” (something), including the communicative meaning, the pragmatic dimension of the text.³³ To be in that situation, we need to do two things. As a first step, we need to explicate our *notion of meaning*, i. e., we need to clarify where this meaning is located (in the mind of the author, for example). Sub-

²⁹ Cf. Heilig, *Paul*, 334–59, on this danger.

³⁰ Heilig, *Paul*, 316–17.

³¹ The literature on this is vast and comes from a variety of difficult angles, some of course coming from an “anti-Marxist” point-of-view, others, however, remaining rooted in leftist thought.

³² On theories of interpretation, see Tom Kindt und Hans-Harald Müller, “Wieviel Interpretation enthalten Beschreibungen? Überlegungen zu einer umstrittenen Unterscheidung am Beispiel der Narratologie,” in *Regeln der Bedeutung: Zur Theorie der Bedeutung literarischer Texte*, ed. Fotis Jannidis, Gerhard Lauer, Matías Martínez, and Simone Winko, Revisionen 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 286–304. On the descriptive status of narratology, see Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, “Narrative Theory and/or/as Theory of Interpretation,” in *What Is Narratology? Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory*, ed. Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, *Narratologia 1* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 205–19. On both, cf. Heilig, *Paul*, 40–45.

³³ On pragmatics as one layer of meaning, see Heilig, *Paul*, 145–52.

sequently, we need to come up with guidelines, a set of methods, of *how* we can reach this goal. With respect to the dominating approach within biblical studies, explicating these two steps would amount to nothing less than an account of what constitutes the “historical-critical method” (which is not a method but an interpretation theory!).

Obviously, there is no place here to even sketch such a framework, as fundamental as it arguably is for then, subsequently, dealing with the question of whether the meaning eventually found is, in fact, “counterimperial” or not. It may not have been such, for example, in the consciousness of an author – but these texts could still have appeared subversive in the mind of plausible recipients, such as Roman citizens or even officials who might have come into contact with early Christian texts and who might have been used to other kinds of stories! I will try to at least point to the fundamental implication of such a differentiation in my analysis of actual texts. But it needs to be emphasized that discussions of whether or not a specific story can count as a “counternarrative” is moot if there is no prior understanding of whether we as participants in the discourse even presuppose the same interpretation theory.

Second, we can only expect the analysis of NT texts to contribute anything to the discussion surrounding counternarratives if we are working with a precise understanding of narratological categories – namely as a set of *descriptive categories* that have the potential both to stimulate our interpretation in certain ways by making us look into specific directions and also to serve as tools for describing the results of our interpretative acts of stories in a way that it facilitates communication about central features of what these stories “mean.” In other words, it is important to note that narratology – rightly understood (“rightly,” as I see it, at least) – does not tell us how to interpret a story. For that, we need – to reiterate this point once more – interpretation theories (which, by the way, also works for *non-narrative* texts). Moreover, it is not even guaranteed that the application of a narratological category such as “order” or “focalization” will yield much benefit for our understanding of the text’s meaning. However, these categories have at least the *potential* to have such a positive heuristic effect.

Thus, in the remainder of this chapter I want to explore how at least some early Christian stories can be illuminated if we apply specific narratological categories to them. As I will try to demonstrate, the attention to this micro-level of textual analysis will shine a spotlight on aspects of the meaning of these texts that have the potential of significantly contributing to the discussion surrounding “counternarratives” – Christian ones and non-Christian ones, anti-imperial ones and those with other fronts in view.

In what follows, I will concentrate on Paul – because his writings are my primary area of expertise, because a lot of discussion in empire criticism is centered around his letters, and because he comes with the unique advantage that he presents us with “miniature narratives” of just a couple of words or

sentences, so that we can deal with them more easily in their entirety.³⁴ Moreover, we have *plenty* of evidence that Paul is indeed a storyteller who is capable of masterfully countering stories that are in circulation. He even shows some astonishing *awareness* of what he is doing, for example, when he counters stories about apostolic accomplishments by imitating them in style but choosing, very explicitly, entirely different events than one might expect (2 Cor 11:16–33) or when he, right after that, pretends to tell a great story of a heavenly journey only to then disappoint expectations again and again (2 Cor 12:1–6).³⁵

Still, limitations of space will permit me only to focus on some facets of these passages. This means that I will also have to be very selective with respect to which narratological categories I will refer to explicitly. In theory, all categories that can be used to describe stories can potentially be used for identifying a critical intertextual relationship between dominating Roman narratives and critical counternarratives by early Christians. A systematic analysis in the near future would be very important.

Here I can only paint a picture of the parameters that are associated with stories using very broad strokes.³⁶ A story is a text (or text part) about at least two events that are chronologically and logically connected. A story might oppose another story thus simply by objecting to something as basic as the choice of events, by painting a different picture of *what* actually happened. For example, it has often been claimed that Paul's story about himself in Gal 1–2 explicitly opposes a version about his past in which he received his gospel from humans (cf. 1:11).³⁷

Disputing the chronology or how events interrelate in terms of causal effects can have similarly fundamental effects on what we call the “plot” of the story. For example, note how in Gal 1:16 the focus seems to be on the fact that it was not “immediately” that Paul consulted local Christian authorities or the apostles in Jerusalem (εὐθέως οὐ προσανεθέμην σαρκὶ καὶ αἵματι),³⁸ which does leave room open for a valid story in which he later did, in fact, communicate with these parties and significantly learn from them. Especially with respect to causal connections in the broadest sense, we regularly observe that Paul accepts a basic storyline but puts a lot of emphasis on which event causes which. For example, in Rom 4:9–12, he retells the story of Abraham in a way that faith leads to a righteous status, with circumcision only serving as a “sign” (v. 11; in Gal 3:15–17 he *omits* the event of Abraham's circumcision).

³⁴ To be sure, they still very much belong to a literary context that is important for their interpretation. See Heilig, *Paul*, chapter 3, specifically pp. 182–97 (on how “narration-specific tasks” are implemented in the act of communication).

³⁵ Heilig, *Paul*, 184–88 and 300–4.

³⁶ For details, I must refer to Heilig, *Paul*, chapter 1.

³⁷ Cf. Heilig, *Paulus*, 492–511. I only touch on this in passing in Heilig, *Paul*, because I plan to write an entire narratological commentary on Galatians in English, which will incorporate my manifold observations on Galatians, which is arguably the main evidence in Heilig, *Paulus*.

³⁸ But cf. also Heilig, *Paulus*, 638–39 on the syntax.

However, even if different storytellers agree on the same basic plot, they might still disagree about the question of what the story is actually about, what “topic” it deals with and what it claims about the topic, what “theme” it has. Is the story of how non-Jews became part of God’s people a story to be told in pride by these new members?³⁹ That seems to be the assumption of Paul’s imagined dialogue partner who in Rom 11:19 is made to say that God broke off the natural branches “so that” the unnatural ones could be crafted in. Paul does not directly object to that plot but he rather delves deeper into the story world, namely into the characterization of the narrative figures that are involved. His focus is on the fact that the branch receives all its strength from the roots of the old tree (vv. 17–18). Moreover, he does not speculate about God’s intention but rather establishes his merciful but strict character as the cause of all action (v. 20) – including future events, such as the happy end for the natural branches (v. 23) but also the potential disaster for the dialogue partner (vv. 21–22) if they continue to tell their story in such a proud way.

We can gather from this example that disagreement about what a story is actually about often finds expression in *how* the story is told. Characterization is one parameter that can vary, as seen in the last example. The order in which events are presented can also have an impact. For example, the Roman Christians will have had their own stories of how they came to faith. Paul’s planned visit to the capital would only have constituted a mere epilogue to these narratives. By posing a series of questions in Rom 10:14–15 that lead the readers from the present state back to the moment of their reception of the gospel, Paul carefully narrates himself into their past, as one of those who have been sent (cf. ἀποστέλλω in v. 15 with ἀπόστολος in Rom 1:1). The speed of narration can similarly create dissonances among different versions of the “same” story. For example, Paul almost seems to indulge in the events narrated in Gal 2:11–13 – most certainly because he was sure that he could exploit this episode toward his rhetorical goal, being so clearly in the right in that situation.⁴⁰ Vividness is another factor at play in how the same situation can be told differently. For example, Paul gives the Galatians a lot of information to imagine when he recounts his initial reception among them in Gal 4:13–15.⁴¹ This even includes allusions to other stories about the reception of angels (v. 14) and counterfactual narratives such as the Galatians plucking out their own eyes and giving them to Paul (v. 15). All this serves to create a foil for another event that later occurred, and that Paul

³⁹ On what follows, cf. Heilig, *Paul*, 290–300.

⁴⁰ Something scholarship has missed by large, falling prey to Paul’s rhetoric and assuming instead that he was on the losing end of the conflict and is now countering stories in which Peter was the clear winner. This is *not* at all the impression we get from Paul’s actual, very confident, storytelling, in which he seems to dramatize the conflict instead of downplaying it.

⁴¹ Heilig, *Paul*, 214. Cf. p. 230 and pp. 234–39 on remote conditional clauses and protonarratives.

interprets as them turning on him. Of course, it is doubtful whether the Galatians would have conceptualized their actions as an explicit affront to Paul – which points to perhaps the most powerful way of varying the “same” story: employing different perspectives to present the same event. Time and again, we can observe Paul carefully trying to let his readers see known events in a new light, from his point-of-view. To adduce just one of countless examples, in 1 Cor 8:10–12⁴² we can initially see how someone in Corinth might have told a story of eating in an idol’s temple, as an innocent act without deeper consequences. Paul, however, reframes the scene. First, he describes how a “weaker” brother (the perspective of the original storyteller is employed here!) might see the act and be influenced (v. 10). Then, he shifts the perspective, retelling how the episode looks from his perspective. What might seem harmless at first glance could, involuntarily, cause spiritual destruction (v. 11).

3 First Case Study: Second Corinthians 2:14 as an Anti-Claudian Counternarrative

I have done extensive work on 2 Cor 2:14 in its literary and historical context.⁴³ In what follows, I want to summarize my findings and draw attention to how understanding this verse specifically as a counternarrative allows for new insights. In the following paragraphs I want to highlight key aspects of the official story about the triumphal procession of Claudius in 44 CE and explain how Paul’s metaphor can be viewed as a fictional story that runs counter to basic parameters of this dominant narrative.

3.1 *The Dominant Claudian Narrative – And Its Weaknesses*

1. *The spatial setting*: The Roman triumph was fundamentally tied to the city of Rome itself – a connection so intrinsic that ancient sources never needed to specify it as a “*Roman triumph*” (Πωμαϊκός θρίαμβος). The very notion of celebrating a triumph outside Rome was considered an oxymoron, making the rare exceptions particularly revealing. When Appian describes a triumph celebrated in New Carthage (*Hist. Rom.* 6.23: ἔθυε τῆς ἐπισύσης καὶ ἔθριάμβευε), historians have had to posit either authorial error or an elaborate literary strategy to make sense of this. Even more telling is Plutarch’s account of Antony’s actions in Alexandria (*Ant.* 50.6), where Antony “seized him [Artavasdes], and took

⁴² Cf. Heilig, *Paul*, 120–22 and 176–79.

⁴³ Christoph Heilig, *Paul’s Triumph: Reassessing 2 Corinthians 2:14 in Its Literary and Historical Context*, BTS 27 (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), and Heilig, *Apostle*, chapters 3 and 4. The following account builds on these analyses. References to the secondary literature can be found there.

him in chains down to Alexandria, where he celebrated a ‘triumph’ (δέσμιον καταγαγών εἰς Ἀλεξάνδρειαν, ἐθριάμβευσεν). This breach of spatial protocol is presented as evidence of how Antony’s infatuation with Cleopatra had led him to commit the unthinkable – staging a Roman triumph outside Rome itself. In other words, any story that was told about a θρίαμβος in the time of Paul would automatically have evoked a certain *setting* in the minds of the audience, the capital of the Empire.

Claudius’s triumph of 44 CE, celebrated after a brief military campaign in Britain, put yet another spotlight on the spatial dimension of this ritual, namely by emphasizing the geographical importance of his victory. The emperor’s speech before the Senate in 48 CE drew attention – albeit under the pretense of rhetorical modesty – to “the glory of having advanced the Empire beyond the Ocean” (*et quaesisse iactationem gloriae pro lati imperi ultra Oceanum; CIL XIII 1668, col. 1, ll. 39–40*). This rhetoric of spatial expansion also found elaborate expression in a contemporary poem, which might even have been recited during the procession itself – constituting a prime example of the kind of official narrative to which a subversive storyteller would be reacting. The *Laus Caesaris* (attested in Latinus Vossianus Q86) presents the Ocean not merely as conquered territory but specifically as an area that is now transformed into the empire’s new center (v. 10: *Oceanus medium venit in imperium*). The poem reaches its climax with the dramatic claim that two previously separate worlds have been united through Claudius’s conquest (v. 42)!

The visual manifestation of these spatial claims (cf. the chapter by Harry O. Maier) is perhaps most impressively preserved in the relief from the south stoa of Aphrodisias. The relief shows Claudius as “a divine superman, ruler of the cosmos and guarantor of prosperity and fortune on land and on sea.”⁴⁴ This iconographic program reinforced Claudius’s portrayal in the East as the “manifest savior god” and divine benefactor of the whole world, a title widely attested in inscriptions (on which cf. the chapter by D. Clint Burnett) from the 40s CE.

This spatial framework was further reinforced in Corinth itself through the establishment of the cult of Victoria Britannica, served by the priest Tiberius Claudius Dinippus, whose role is documented in multiple inscriptions. We can assume that as part of this cult, yearly sacrifices were offered to Victoria Britannica on the anniversary of Claudius’s British victory, with religious processions and feasts for the civic community. The triumph’s spatial symbolism was thus regularly reenacted far from Rome itself. In other words, the addressees of Second Corinthians would have known all too well, how this story was supposed to be told by faithful citizens of the Empire.

⁴⁴ R. R. R. Smith, *The Marble Reliefs from the Julio-Claudian Sebasteion at Aphrodisias*, vol. 6 of *Aphrodisias* (Darmstadt: von Zabern, 2013), 171.

2. *Chronology and plot*: Arguably the most fundamental parameter of any narrative is *time*.⁴⁵ If one wanted to tell a story about triumphal processions – especially about the one by Claudius – and one wanted to follow the public transcript, precisely this dimension posed significant challenges.

The problem already began with Claudius's military campaign itself. The official story had to deal with a striking temporal compression: Claudius had left Rome for merely half a year, with his actual presence in Britannia limited to just 16 days. This temporal challenge manifests most clearly in the *Laus Caesaris*, where the abbreviated timeframe is transformed into a point of glory. The triumph song proclaims *conspectu devicta tuo, Germanice Caesar* (v. 39), suggesting that the mere sight of the emperor had caused Britannia to surrender. What could have been narrated as an embarrassingly short campaign is thus recast as evidence of imperial power so overwhelming that prolonged military engagement was unnecessary. But is that a convincing story?

The triumphal procession itself was also inherently a matter full of temporal tensions. During the Republic, the ephemeral rite had served a specific transitional function: the triumphator's extraordinary elevation (including his likeness to Jupiter) was meant to facilitate his subsequent reintegration into society as a peer among senators. Claudius's triumph in 44 CE, however, is marked by a significant shift in this temporal logic. As a triumph celebrated by a sitting emperor, it required a different narrative framework for handling the relationship between temporary ritual glory and permanent imperial power. The official response to this temporal tension becomes visible in various commemorative strategies. For example, Suetonius (*Claud.* 17.3) reports that Claudius "set a naval crown on the gable of the Palace beside the civic crown, as a sign that he had crossed and, as it were, subdued the Ocean."

However, Claudius seems to have faced a rather unique problem with respect to transitioning into a phase of commemorating the procession in a way that would merge the past accomplishment with lasting glory. When the British chieftain Caratacus was captured years later, in 51 CE, this led to a kind of re-enactment of the final episode of the triumph, one that by its very nature seemed to retrospectively acknowledge the incompleteness of the arc of suspense of the original story. At least in Tacitus's account (*Ann.* 12.36) this later parade of the captive is presented as the completion of the original event. We can observe here how the template for the dominating story of Claudius's triumph contained a slot that could be filled with a fitting event only in 51 CE. This presentation of Caratacus is more than a mere epilogue, it finally brings closure to a hitherto

⁴⁵ On the various ways in which this could be explicated, see Heilig, *Paul*, 55–111, with references. Cf. now also Christoph Heilig, "Zeit im Verhältnis: Narratologische und linguistische Perspektiven," in *Zeit und Ewigkeit: Ein Lehrbuch*, ed. Benjamin Schliesser, Jan Rüggemeier, and Michael Jost (forthcoming; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck).

incomplete arc of suspense and constitutes the happy end of the story. This already points us to the importance of the captives as narrative characters in the dominant narrative – and to narrative characters we thus now turn.

3. *Narrative characters*: Compared to Republican times, the cast of characters in triumph narratives had undergone a dramatic transformation by the time of Paul. While earlier accounts featured various triumphators from different noble families, by Claudius's time the triumph had become an exclusively imperial privilege. As the historical evidence demonstrates, this fundamentally altered how the ritual's character roles were understood and portrayed.

The triumphator's characterization involved a complex merging of political, military, and divine elements. During the triumph, the emperor appeared in the likeness of Jupiter, continuing an ancient tradition that may trace back to Etruscan prototypes of the *triumphus*. This divine association was particularly significant because, unlike Republican generals who only temporarily took on divine features during the triumph, Claudius as emperor maintained permanent divine associations. The above-mentioned Aphrodisias relief captures this dual characterization, presenting him simultaneously as a military victor over the personified Britannia and as a character with divine properties.

This divine characterization was further enriched by connections to Dionysian mythology. The very terminology of triumph had etymological links to Dionysos, who bore the epithet Θρίαμβος. As archaeological evidence shows, Roman elites were well aware of these Dionysian associations. For example, the Hague Cameo, which may depict Claudius's triumph, incorporates such mythical elements, with “both the krater and the centaurs transpos[ing] military victory into a Dionysian cavalcade.”⁴⁶

Telling a story about a triumphator in the first century would, thus, naturally also be a “religious” matter, one that invoked the divine realm. Moreover, the contours of the divine emperor figure would have been rather concrete by default to any listener to such a story in the 50s. For Claudius's triumph of 44 CE was the first triumph celebrated by a sitting emperor that Paul's generation witnessed. From 19 BCE onwards, the triumph had been reserved for the emperor and his family, marking a sharp break from Republican times when multiple generals could celebrate triumphs (with twelve triumphs occurring between 260–251 BCE alone, and four in 71 BCE). When the next triumph would be celebrated in 71 CE, Paul would already be dead. Thus, for Paul's audience, the role of triumphator was not an abstract category but was concretely associated with this specific historical event and the emperor Claudius.

As already hinted at, the success of Claudius's triumph narrative was significantly compromised by a conspicuous lack of impressive captives. While

⁴⁶ R. R. R. Smith, “Maiestas Serena: Roman Court Cameos and Early Imperial Poetry and Panegyric,” *JRS* 111 (2021): 1–78.

the fragment of his triumphal arch does mention *reges* (chieftains), the initial display of British prisoners appears to have been insufficient for the story's dramatic needs. The fact that the capture of the British chieftain Caratacus led to a kind of second triumphal procession in 51 CE demonstrates this weakness of the original story. Tacitus's account of this event (*Ann.* 12.36) is also revealing, however, in a more specific way, showing how a "proper" antagonist was supposed to function in the triumph narrative. The historian emphasizes that there was "not a downcast look nor a word requested pity" (*at non Caratacus aut vultu demissso aut verbis misericordiam requirens*). The noble bearing of this belated captive provided exactly the kind of worthy opponent that had been missing from the original triumph's cast of characters. This dignified demeanor paradoxically reinforced rather than diminished the glory of his conqueror.

The need for this narrative supplement is further highlighted by Seneca's later satirical treatment in the *Apocolocyntosis*. His mockery of Claudius's claims about subduing the Brigantes (12.3) exposes the original triumph's deficiency in great villains. As far as the "chains" mentioned in connection with the Brigantes were concerned, the most notable ones were those put on Caratacus when Cartimandua, their queen, handed him over after he sought refuge in her territory (Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.36) – hardly the decisive military victory the triumph narrative demanded.

This weakness in antagonist characterization is even reflected in the material evidence. A cameo previously thought to depict a British captive from Claudius's campaign is now recognized (based on hairstyle analysis) as actually portraying Augustus, with the captive being either a Dalmatian or an unspecified barbarian. This leaves us with only the controversial Great/Hague Cameo as potential depiction of Claudius's triumph, demonstrating how the lack of worthy antagonists affected even the visual representation of the official story.

The triumph narrative required not just the triumphator and his captives, but also carefully positioned observers whose presence would validate the entire ceremony. As Olivier Hekster emphasizes in his analysis of Roman army propaganda, "[t]riumphs and other forms of ceremony were only visible to those who were there to witness." He concludes that they were therefore "limited as forms of propaganda."⁴⁷ This limitation explains why Claudius took extraordinary measures to ensure proper witnesses for his triumph. According to Suetonius (*Claud.* 17), the emperor not only called governors back to Rome but even invited exiles to see him marching in the triumphal procession. These efforts demonstrate that the physical presence of observers was considered essential for the ritual to have its intended effect. And this emphasis on eyewitnesses had important implications for how knowledge about the triumph would

⁴⁷ Olivier Hekster, "The Roman Army and Propaganda," in *A Companion to the Roman Army*, ed. Paul Erdkamp, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 349.

spread throughout the Empire. Anyone not physically present in Rome – including Paul and the Corinthians – would have been dependent on eyewitness accounts to learn specific details about this victory celebration.

3.2 Paul's Counternarrative

1. *The triumph as fictional storyworld*: When Paul portrays God as leading him and his co-workers in triumph (2 Cor 2:14), he creates what narratologists would call a “fictional storyworld” through metaphorical language (on metaphors, see also the chapter by Erin Heim in this volume). While metaphors have traditionally been viewed merely as means of “figurative speech,” contemporary metaphor theory emphasizes that metaphors create new cognitive spaces where elements from different domains can interact. In this case, Paul constructs an imaginative space where the ritual dynamics of the Roman triumph can be radically reconfigured. This metaphorical world-building allows Paul to engage with and subvert official triumph narratives while maintaining what literary theorists call “fictive distance” – the metaphor signals itself as non-literal while still carrying profound rhetorical force. It, thus, also lends itself as a means for bringing up a “hidden transcript” (cf. Laura Robinson on this context) in a public discourse in “veiled” form. While Paul does not write this metaphor in a letter addressed to a Roman official, we could very well imagine how a Roman official might react if they read it – and how Paul’s excuse might look.

2. *Substituting the triumphator*: Paul’s most radical narrative move is his substitution of the triumphator. In place of Claudius, whose triumph of 44 CE would have been fresh in Corinthian memory, Paul installs God as the one “who always leads us in triumph” (cf. the attributive participle θριαμβεύοντι). This substitution gains particular force when we consider how unprecedented it was – in all attestations of the verb θριαμβεύω from the second century BCE to the third century CE, it is never used for activity by a divine being (except the emperors, if we count them as such). And even in cases where gods like Dionysos are indeed portrayed – by means of other words – as celebrating triumphs, the ritual maintains its fundamentally Roman military character.

This divine substitution creates fascinating resonances with other contemporary counternarratives, particularly Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*. Where Seneca satirically undermines Claudius’s claims to divinity after his death, Paul’s metaphor more subtly displaces imperial pretensions by presenting YHWH as the true divine triumphator. Just as the *Apocolocyntosis* uses humor to expose the gap between Claudius’s divine aspirations and human failings, Paul’s metaphor implicitly challenges the emperor’s ritual assumption of divine attributes during the triumph.

The parallel with Ovid’s portrayal of Cupid as triumphator (*Am. 1.2*) is particularly illuminating. As scholars have noted, Ovid’s image is “dazzlingly sub-

versive,⁴⁸ not only mocking the militaristic ethos of the ceremony but perhaps even commenting on “the growing restriction of this honorific procession to members of the imperial family.”⁴⁹ Paul’s substitution operates with similar complexity – by installing the Jewish God as triumphator, he challenges not only Claudius’s specific triumph but the entire imperial monopoly on triumph celebration established since 19 BCE.

This narrative move gains additional force from its timing. Since Claudius’s triumph of 44 CE was the first by a sitting emperor that Paul’s generation had witnessed, the role of triumphator was thus not an abstract category but concretely associated with this specific historical event and the emperor Claudius. By metaphorically usurping this role for God, Paul’s counternarrative directly engages the most potent recent expression of imperial ideology in Rome.

2. Reframing space and time: Having examined above how the official triumph narrative managed space and time in carefully prescribed ways, we can now analyze how Paul’s counternarrative systematically challenges these constraints through two key phrases: *πάντοτε* (“always”) and *ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ* (“in every place”).

As we’ve seen, the spatial exclusivity of Rome for triumph celebrations was so fundamental that even exceptions like Antony’s Alexandrian ceremony served to prove the rule. Against this backdrop of spatial sanctity that we traced in the official narrative, Paul’s assertion of triumph celebrations “in every place” represents a radical de-centering. This gains particular force when we consider how it subverts the careful balance we observed in official ideology between celebrating imperial expansion while maintaining Rome’s centrality.

The temporal dimension is equally disruptive. Whereas the official narrative had to carefully manage the brevity of Claudius’s campaign through poetic devices, Paul’s *πάντοτε* creates either an endless triumph or, perhaps more plausibly, and just as provocatively, multiple triumphs. Both readings fundamentally challenge the temporal logic of triumph narratives we analyzed earlier.

The iterative reading deserves particular attention as a narrative strategy. In this interpretation, Paul portrays his missionary journeys as a series of triumphs occurring throughout the empire – and beyond. This directly challenges both the spatial hierarchy and the imperial monopoly on triumphs we documented in the official narrative.

The spatial reconfiguration in Paul’s counternarrative becomes even more complex through the phrase “in Christ.” This spatial marker creates intriguing narrative tensions with both the Roman triumph’s required location and Paul’s universal “in every place.”

⁴⁸ Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 52.

⁴⁹ John F. Miller, “Reading Cupid’s Triumph,” *CJ* 90 (1995): 294.

Several interpretative possibilities emerge, each with different narrative implications. If “Christ” designates a sphere within the triumph itself, analogous to formulations like “among the captives,” this would align with a substitutionary reading where Christians are represented by the crucified Christ. A parallel for such usage of the preposition exists in Plutarch’s account where Cleopatra refuses to let the deceased Antony be displayed “in her” (*Ant.* 84.7).

More radically, “in Christ” could function as an alternative to Rome as the triumph’s setting. This reading would intensify the counterimperial force of Paul’s narrative by directly replacing Rome’s spatial privilege with a new, theological space. However, this interpretation faces linguistic challenges – we would expect a more specific spatial adjunct like “in Christ’s procession.”

The most narratologically compelling reading sees the spatial specification as influenced by the metaphor’s target domain, reinforcing divine agency in Paul’s mission. This interpretation gains support from how the triumph imagery gives way to only superficially related scent metaphors even within verse 14, suggesting a careful narrative transition away from the Roman frame to theological reality.

This multilayered spatial construction – simultaneously “in Christ” and “in every place” – creates what we might call a narrative space that transcends both Roman geographic constraints and purely metaphorical readings.⁵⁰ It allows Paul to appropriate the triumph’s spatial symbolism while fundamentally transforming its meaning.

3. *Paul and his co-workers as prisoners of war*: Paul’s self-portrayal as a captive in God’s triumph gains particular force when read against contemporary critiques of Claudius’s military achievements. Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* provides crucial context here, by constituting evidence of a contemporary satirical retelling of the official story that aims at exposing how Claudius’s triumph narrative labored to present minor diplomatic maneuvers as grand military victories.

Against this background of skepticism about Claudius’s achievement, including the lack of impressive captives, Paul’s willing submission to God as the triumphator takes on additional narrative significance. While Claudius struggled to present worthy antagonists – leading to the need for a second procession with Caratacus in 51 CE – Paul offers himself as a different kind of captive entirely. The legitimacy of his captivity stems not from military defeat but from divine conquest, creating a narrative that simultaneously acknowledges and transcends the triumph’s traditional logic.

4. *Narrative perspective and pragmatics*: Paul’s triumph imagery in 2 Cor 2:14 demonstrates a masterful manipulation of narrative perspective to achieve pas-

⁵⁰ Generally, space has become more important in discussions surrounding Paul in recent years. Cf. Konrad Huber and Esther Kobel, eds., *Raum und Raumvorstellungen bei Paulus*, Studies in Cultural Contexts of the Bible 17 (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2024). Christian Blumenthal, *Paulinische Raum-Politik im Philippbrief*, FRLANT 286 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023) explicitly draws out political implications.

toral transformation. The immediate context shows why this was necessary to begin with. In 2:12–13, Paul describes abandoning a promising evangelistic opportunity in Troas to search for Titus. Such apparently erratic behavior had already drawn criticism a chapter earlier, with Paul having to defend himself against charges of “fickleness” when changing his travel plans (cf. the mention of ἔλαφρία in 2 Cor 1:17).

The triumph metaphor addresses this crisis by casting the Corinthians in a familiar role – that of the watching crowd at a triumph. Just as spectators at a triumphal procession would witness captives being led through the streets, the Corinthians observe Paul’s movements across the empire. And they don’t like what they see – Paul seems to be in a rather shameful role from their perspective. Hence, by choosing the metaphor, Paul initially accepts their perspective. But then, he tries to transform this perception⁵¹ by revealing these captives’ true status. For from the perspective of the one who leads the procession, the shame of captivity is essential for ultimately bringing glory to him, the triumphator.

This perspectival shift is particularly powerful because it accepts the Corinthians’ perception of him while nudging them to view this image in a greater narrative context. Just as noble captives like Caratacus could paradoxically increase Rome’s prestige through their dignified bearing, Paul’s willing submission to divine guidance demonstrates not weakness but proper recognition of God’s authority. His seemingly directionless movements become evidence not of fickleness but of faithful service to divine power. If the Corinthians have a problem with him, they now must recognize that they actually have a problem with the triumphator, God himself.

3.3 Conclusion

Paul’s transformation of the triumph narrative in 2 Corinthians 2:14 operates on multiple levels that work together to create a sophisticated narrative reimagining of his ministry. By installing God as the divine triumphator, universalizing the ceremony across space and time, recasting himself as a willing captive, and repositioning the Corinthians as witnesses to divine rather than imperial victory, Paul systematically reconstructs every key element of the traditional triumph narrative to tell the story of his apostolic work.

If we scrutinize this creative retelling with respect to the pragmatics of the story, it becomes apparent that this comprehensive reworking primarily serves to help his congregation understand his seemingly erratic movements as faithful submission to divine guidance, creating a theological framework that gives meaning to his missionary journeys. In other words, by using the metaphor Paul creates a fictional counternarrative that is meant to weaken the appearance

⁵¹ This is a typical move for Paul. Cf. Heilig, *Paul*, 116, on, for example, 1 Cor 9:19.

of reliability of the factual narrative about the way he conducts his ministry. On a surface level, 2 Cor 2:14 thus is a prime example of a Pauline counternarrative that combats a story that circulates about him *within* the church.

However, in doing so, his narrative inevitably engages with and creates dissonances with the dominant imperial narrative about Claudius's recent British triumph. Paul, thus, becomes one voice among presumably many (though most have not been documented!) that questioned these claims. Hence, this verse is not just testament of intra-Christian competition for dominance in storytelling, it is also an “anti-imperial” counternarrative in some sense.

Still, one important caveat is in order here: From a *Claudian* perspective, 2 Cor 2:14 would have been perceived no doubt as a counternarrative. Ironically, however, Paul's satirical retelling actually aligns well with the new *dominant* narrative under Nero! In fact, this might in part explain why Paul dares to use such a provocative imagery in this letter at all. It is in this new environment that he can tell such a story without breaching the public transcript too much (on that notion, cf. the chapter by Laura Robinson in this volume).

4 Second Case Study: Counternarratives in Galatians

The following analysis builds on earlier work that I have done on Galatians, which did not offer me, however, the opportunity to present all my thoughts on Paul's interaction with the Roman realm in terms of counternarratives.⁵²

First of all, we can note that Galatians is a particularly interesting object of study because it is notable how little attention this letter has received in major edited volumes dedicated to the subject of empire criticism. While Galatians has been the subject of monographs dedicated to this topic,⁵³ its role in survey-style collections remains minimal. For instance, Galatians is *entirely* absent from the index of *Zwischen den Reichen*,⁵⁴ one of the earlier attempts to explore the role of the Roman empire in the New Testament. Similarly, *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not*⁵⁵ contains only three references to Galatians in its index, despite the volume's

⁵² Christoph Heilig, “Counter-Narratives in Galatians,” in *Scripture, Texts, and Tracings in Galatians and 1 Thessalonians*, ed. A. Andrew Das and B. J. Oropeza (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2023), 171–90.

⁵³ See, in particular, Justin K. Hardin, *Galatians and the Imperial Cult*, WUNT II/237 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), and Christina Harker, *The Colonizers' Idols: Paul, Galatia, and Empire in New Testament Studies*, WUNT II/460 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

⁵⁴ Michael Labahn and Jürgen Zangenberg, eds., *Zwischen den Reichen: Neues Testament und Römische Herrschaft*, TANZ 36 (Tübingen: A. Francke, 2002).

⁵⁵ Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, eds., *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013).

broad aim of evaluating Empire in the New Testament. Perhaps most telling is the treatment of Galatians in *Empire in the New Testament*.⁵⁶ Here, Galatians is classified as one of the “Minor Pauline Epistles,”⁵⁷ receiving less than 2.5 pages of discussion, focused almost exclusively on the motif of the cross. While this classification may reflect pragmatic decisions – such as article length or the overarching focus on Romans and the Corinthian correspondence – the minimal attention to Galatians feels striking, particularly from a German perspective, where the letter is unambiguously one of the four *Hauptbriefe*. This relative neglect of Galatians in edited volumes underscores a gap in the scholarly discourse on Paul and Empire.

A key reason for the limited focus on counterimperial readings of Galatians – particularly in terms of intertextuality with Roman propaganda – may lie in the socio-historical debates surrounding the letter, often centered on Galatians 6:12–13. These discussions tend to treat the text primarily as evidence for reconstructing its historical context rather than as a site of literary or ideological interaction with imperial ideology. Scholarship in this vein⁵⁸ frequently interprets Galatians through archaeological and socio-political data, with textual dynamics being treated as secondary concerns.⁵⁹

While I believe that it is by no means certain, perhaps not even plausible, that Gal 6:12–13 reflects impending Roman persecution,⁶⁰ I do think that the danger of ending up before a Roman governor and being executed – not as “Christians” who disobeyed a specific religious law, but simply as members of a troublesome minority! – did not emerge with Pliny in the second century but was there already in very similar shape at the time of Paul’s communities.⁶¹ Accordingly,

⁵⁶ Stanley E. Porter and Cynthia Long Westfall, eds., *Empire in the New Testament*, McMaster New Testament Studies 10 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

⁵⁷ Matthew Forrest Lowe, “Atonement and Empire: Paul’s Reconfiguration of Substitution,” in *Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Cynthia Long Westfall, McMaster New Testament Studies 10 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 203–20.

⁵⁸ Hardin, *Galatians*, or Thomas Witulski, *Die Adressaten des Galaterbriefes: Untersuchungen zur Gemeinde von Antiochia ad Pisidiam*, FRLANT 193 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000).

⁵⁹ James R. Harrison, “Paul and Empire 2: Negotiating the Seduction of Imperial ‘Peace and Security’ in Galatians, Thessalonians, and Philippians,” in *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Adam Winn, RBS 84 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 173–75, exemplifies this approach. He examines the archaeological backdrop of Galatians, drawing attention to Roman ideological markers that might inform Paul’s rhetoric. For instance, the description of the present age as “evil” (Galatians 1:4) is interpreted as a stark counterpoint to Augustan propaganda, which extolled the emperor’s reign as the dawn of a new golden age. Similarly, Harrison identifies terms like “grace,” “justice,” and “faith” in Galatians as carrying critical resonances when juxtaposed with Roman ideological discourse.

⁶⁰ Heilig, “Counter-Narratives.”

⁶¹ See Corke-Webster, “Trouble,” for the historical argument behind my thesis in Heilig, *Apostle*. He has reacted to my attempt to draw on his research in James Corke-Webster, “Roman History,” *GR* 71 (2024): 157. While he is not totally in love with the “tone” (which, he says, “re-

we have every reason to inquire to what extent we can find reactions to Roman ideology in Galatians, given that “Rome” would have been not just something like a dominant cultural background but also a very concrete and realistic *threat* to new followers of the Messiah Jesus in Asia Minor.

4.1 *The Crucified Messiah*

Unsurprisingly, a central character in many of Paul’s stories is Jesus, the Messiah. Ellen Howard is currently conducting research on precisely these stories (as part of my project on early Christian narratives in Munich), for the first time providing an account of which events of Jesus’s life(/lives!) are mentioned in the Pauline letters and how, if at all, they can be pieced together into a coherent master-story. Once this research is published, the discussion below will, hence, have to be reevaluated against that backdrop.

From my own reading of Paul’s letters, I can, however, already make some observations here on how Paul’s storytelling involves the *death* of Jesus and how that pertains to the question of potential anti-Roman counternarratives.

Before we turn to Galatians specifically, I want to pause a moment to emphasize how astonishing Paul’s fixation on Jesus’s death is to begin with. The Christian traditions that shape our cultures to this day and in which many of us have been raised sometimes blind us to the fact of how astonishing this circumstance is. We are reading copies of letters written by someone to a group of people decades after a certain individual had perished and even though these letters often have to do with very specific everyday situations, such as being invited to birthday parties by people outside of this community, the death of this person is mentioned again and again.

But what is remarkable is not just the frequency and pervasiveness of such references (according to Ellen Howard, only Philemon lacks a clear reference), what is most notable to me from a narratological perspective is *how* this death is renarrated again and again.

First, we can observe that the verbs Paul uses to renarrate the execution of Jesus are often surprisingly *neutral*. For example, Paul never uses φονεύω, a typical word for murder, to express what happened to Jesus. In fact, right after mentioning “the state” (as many believe he does) in Rom 13:1–7, the government

calls the raw early albums of great bands – moments of brilliant insight juxtaposed with an occasionally naïve writing style and scattergun broadsides against entire genres or disciplines”), he also says that the book “is fundamentally correct in its call for attention to the specific local contexts of early Christian documents.” He adds: “In turn, we might add, those documents read as such provide us with fresh material for judging provincial reaction to Rome’s appearance on the local stage. Right or wrong, then, it certainly demonstrates the Janus-faced rewards from bringing what remain substantially different disciplines closer together.” We might not just add that, I explicitly had added that in Heilig, *Apostle!* This essay is another attempt to sketch how this might look like with respect to the specific context of Galatians.

that had killed his Messiah, he tells *the believers* (!) not to conduct precisely such acts. In some sense, we can thus say that even though Paul's interpretation of the death of Christ certainly was scandalous to Roman minds, the way he recalls that event is actually quite *harmless* most of the time. To say that Jesus died on a *σταυρός* would not itself have sounded objectionable to Roman ears – they would just have been astonished how the death of an apparent – no, obvious – criminal might have had any positive consequences.

To sum up, it seems that while Paul is keenly interested in a theological understanding of Jesus's death, he is not interested in renegotiating it vis-à-vis a Roman perception of what transpired. Even 1 Tim 6:13 only tells us that Jesus "made the good confession before Pontius Pilate" (Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ τοῦ μαρτυρήσαντος ἐπὶ Πιοντίου Πιλάτου τὴν καλὴν ὁμολογίαν) but doesn't attempt to relitigate the case.

Second, what seems to strengthen this impression of a neutral "report" at least at first sight is that quite frequently Paul tells his readers about the death of Jesus by means of *indicative* verb forms. That might not seem strange at first sight, but it is remarkable if we see how streamlined Paul's narration usually is.⁶² When Paul mentions events that he can assume his audience to understand as having actually happened, he often refers to them simply by means of participles and infinitives, which do not grammatically encode this relationship to reality and, more specifically, to the past. So why is Paul actually stating the death of Jesus in such an explicit way? Of course, with respect to Jesus's death Paul's goal can't be to *inform* his audiences *that* Jesus died. They know that! If we look closer, we can see that what is focal (communicatively important)⁶³ in many of these cases is a circumstance of this death – such as *when* (Rom 5:8) it occurred or *to what end* (Rom 14:9). In other words, Paul tells a story to cause reevaluations of this known situation, to change perspectives that people have on it – but he interestingly does so quite frequently in a pattern that aligns well with a more neutral assertive-informing function. It seems to me that this points to the fact that Paul wants his interpretations of Jesus's death to be viewed as historical facts. The impression of a neutral report thus serves Paul's rhetorical strategy in that he is actually doing the opposite, establishing a theological reframing.

Third, we can see this interpretative perspective of Paul play out in much more detail when he uses metaphors to talk about Jesus's death. Time and again he uses metaphors to portray Jesus's death as sacrifice or as ransom (cf. also Erin Heim's essay on metaphors in this volume).⁶⁴ These instances raise the issue of

⁶² Cf. Heilig, *Paul*, chapter 3.

⁶³ See Heilig, *Paul*, 49–51 and 62–65, with references to detailed discussions in Heilig, *Paulus*.

⁶⁴ A very concise discussion on this topic of different interpretations of the death of Jesus and the role of metaphors is offered by Ruben Zimmermann, "Deuten" heißt erzählen und übertragen: Narrativität und Metaphorik als sprachliche Grundformen historischer Sinnbildung zum Tod Jesu," in *Deutungen des Todes Jesu im Neuen Testament*, ed. Jörg Frey and Jens Schröter,

fictionality as a means to get to the ultimate reality of this event (cf. above on 2 Cor 2:14 as a metaphor that creates a fictive storyworld). It seems that Paul makes sense of Jesus's death not so much by delving into the details of what "actually" transpired but by aiming at creative literary reimaginings of these events – which usually would have been very strange from a Roman perspective.

Fourth, what makes many of Paul's rather neutral mentions of Jesus's death particularly strange from a Roman perspective is that they are incorporated into larger narratives that are thematically radically innovative compared to other crucifixion narratives. In other words, it is the *plot* of these stories that makes them so astonishing, in particular the fact that a death and a "resurrection" are mentioned next to each other as equally historical events (1 Cor 15:3–4, to give just one example). This is not, to be sure, an ordinary story about a criminal in the Roman east! To this we can add the fact that very many of Paul's stories are not just that, stories of what happened or is happening now – they often merge into "protonarratives," stories that one might be able to tell at one point in the future, but which also include so far "unnarratable" – future – events (cf. Phil 2:8–11, to mention again just a single out of many cases).⁶⁵

Fifth, and finally, we can observe a very peculiar feature in this tension between on the one hand aspects that might align well with a Roman perspective on crucified persons and on the other hand features in these stories which clearly go beyond what the dominant narratives would contain – the fact that Paul usually, though not always, avoids mentioning the narrative characters who were the actual agents of crucifixion. *That* it was the Romans – that a Roman governor would have convicted Jesus to die in such a way and that Roman soldiers would have carried through the execution – was simply a known fact. But it is all the more suspicious that Paul's use of specific verbs and the middle voice results in him rarely shining a spotlight on this fact. When he does use a transitive verb in the active mood, such as *ἀποκτείνω* in 1 Thess 2:15, this is because he has a lot of heavy lifting to do there, shifting blame to Jesus's *Jewish* contemporaries! Against that backdrop, 1 Cor 2:6–8 is an indeed notable exception: to talk about the "rulers of this age" and their lack of understanding and to explicitly identify them with those who put Jesus to the cross, is a rather careless provocative statement against the Roman killers of Jesus.⁶⁶

2nd ed., UTB 2953 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 355–60. For a recent, more detailed discussion, see Sophia Niepert-Rumel, *Metaphernkombinationen in der neutestamentlichen Rede vom Tod Jesu*, WUNT II/563 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 615–32.

⁶⁵ On protonarratives, see Heilig, *Paul*, chapter 4.

⁶⁶ It does not help to point to Col 2:15 in an attempt to reinterpret these rulers as demonic entities. So Martin Dibelius, *An die Kolosser, Epheser, an Philemon*, 2nd ed., HNT 12 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1927), 24, even makes the connection to 1 Cor 2:6, interpreting both exclusively on a spiritual level, however: "Indem Gott den Christus zur Herrlichkeit erhöhte, hat er die Geister, die ihn unwissend gekreuzigt hatten, bloßgestellt." Rather, it is the other way around: Col 2:15 – with its reference to the *Roman* triumphal procession (cf. above on 2 Cor 2:14)! –

If we turn to Galatians now, can we observe any similar counternarratives surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus? I maintain that it is at least very reasonable to suspect that terminology of crucifixion might be the best candidate to find such stories in this letter, because it comes closest to Roman technical vocabulary.⁶⁷

Moreover, we do have some, albeit limited, evidence that the recipients of the letters *might* have lived in a situation in which Roman gubernatorial practice – with all its brutality – might have been a rather pressing issue. To be sure, we do not have any concrete evidence for executions for the relevant region and timeframe.⁶⁸ It is, however, at least notable that inscriptional evidence (*CIL* III 6799) from Lake Trogitis – right in the middle between Paul’s route (cf. Acts 13–14), between Perga and Pisidian Antioch in the west and Derbe in the east – shows that the governor M. Annius Afrinus visited this very remote region in the south of the province during his term (49–54 CE).⁶⁹ Similarly, for his successor, Q. Petronius Umber – who held the post while the reign was transitioning from Claudius to Nero – an imperial estate is documented at Düger in Pisinia (*SEG* 19:765,b).⁷⁰ If Galatians were written to the south of the province Galatia, this would at least demonstrate that the recipients suddenly were able to witness Roman rule from a front row seat, with all kinds of anxieties coming to the forefront.

How does the Roman practice of execution by crucifixion feature in the letter? Attention has of course been drawn to the fact that in Gal 3:1 Paul underlines how “vividly” the Messiah had been presented *as crucified* to the Galatians (οἵς κατ’ ὄφθαλμοὺς Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς προεγράφη ἐσταυρωμένος;). Commentators usually focus on the question of Paul’s presentation.⁷¹ But one might also ponder to what extent the Galatians might have had personal encounters with crucifixions that might have contributed to what they imagined. More recent cognitive-linguistic research has emphasized the collaborative nature of storytelling and encourages us to take the lived reality of the recipients more seriously when it comes to the construal of such horrendous scenes of killing.

Moreover, in light of the executions (though most certainly by means of decapitation) under Pliny (cf. above), it also seems advisable to reread the state-

demonstrates that Paul can refer to political actors with very clear vocabulary while narrating them into a larger story in which they are characterized *as* being under demonic influence. Cf. Heilig, *Apostle*, 126.

⁶⁷ Heilig, *Hidden Criticism*, 140–43 and Heilig, *Triumph*, 6.

⁶⁸ For a list of attested crucifixions, see John Granger Cook, “Roman Crucifixions: From the Second Punic War to Constantine,” *ZNW* 104 (2013): 1–32.

⁶⁹ Cf. Robert K. Sheck, “Roman Galatia: The Governors from 25 B.C. to A.D. 114,” *ANRW* 7.2:976, and W.M. Ramsay, “Studies in the Roman Province Galatia: III. Imperial Government of the Province Galatia,” *JRS* 12 (1922): 159.

⁷⁰ Sheck, “Galatia,” 978.

⁷¹ Cf., e.g., Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 181–82.

ments concerning crucifixion with a greater sensitivity for the anxieties that the Galatians might have had for their *own* security. This is an area where historically oriented exegesis might still have a lot to learn from postcolonial interpretation, which can draw our attention to the sheer fear of death that many subordinated people experience on a daily basis.⁷² Especially for the slaves (cf. Gal 3:28!), crucifixion will have constituted a real horror to be reckoned with.⁷³

Keeping this in mind, it is noteworthy that Paul – in his quoted speech to Peter⁷⁴ – says that at the time of speaking he *is* in a state of co-crucifixion with Christ (Gal 2:19: Χριστῷ συνεσταύρωμαι; note the resultative aspect; in Rom 6:6, Paul uses the perfective aspect). It is the same verb that is also used in the New Testament for those who were crucified next to Jesus (Matt 27:44; Mark 15:32; Joh 19:32). As people who no longer need to fear execution by crucifixion,⁷⁵ I think we might perhaps be missing a certain comforting element here (cf. Justin Winzenburg's essay on different functions of speech in this volume), namely the idea that the horror of this prospect might actually be weakened by the idea that one has already experienced a life-shattering, death-like, event of similar proportions (cf. of course also Rom 6 for baptism and burial language).

In Gal 6:14, we find the verb without prefix but again in the perfect indicative. Notably, it follows immediately after the talk about “persecution” in v. 12. We cannot know for sure what was in view, but under certain circumstances it seems very likely that this notion would have called attention once again to the, ever present, danger of being subjected to Roman sanctions. In this context, it is very notable that in v. 14 the “cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (... ἐν τῷ σταυρῷ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) is not only presented as the exclusive object of boasting ('Εμοὶ δὲ μὴ γένοιτο καυχᾶσθαι εἰ μὴ ...) but also as the instrument through which Paul “is crucified” with respect to the world and the world is crucified to him (δι’ οὐ ἐμοὶ κόσμος ἐσταύρωται καγώ κόσμῳ). We must not miss the strangeness of the idea that the “world” – and that was, especially with regard to the notion of crucifixion, basically the *Roman Empire* – has undergone a crucifixion too.

It seems reasonable to me to assume that the evocation of such an idea might have contributed towards activating the political domain associated with κανὴ κτίσις in the next verse, v. 15.⁷⁶ Dominika Kurek-Chomycz and Reimund Bieringer have made a convincing case that the phrase stands in contrast with the

⁷² Heilig, *Apostle*, 103–16.

⁷³ See John Granger Cook, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*, WUNT 327 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), chapter 6, on the legal background.

⁷⁴ See Heilig, *Paulus*, 509.

⁷⁵ See Cook, *Crucifixion*, 398–416 on its abolition.

⁷⁶ Cf. Heilig, *Apostle*, 117–27, on the cognitive-linguistic framework behind this.

Roman “new creation” of Corinth in 2 Cor 5:17.⁷⁷ Given the signals in the context, something similar might be going on here in Galatians: With the whole Empire immobilized at the cross (and its leaders paraded around on it in a triumphal procession?),⁷⁸ it is those who are connected with Christ who, after their burial and resurrection in baptism (cf. Rom 6 with Gal 3:27), are now establishing new settlements ...

While in Gal 6:14 Christ and the Christians are at least no longer the only ones who must deal with crucifixion, in Gal 5:24 they, similarly, are more than just the passive recipients of this cruel Roman method of execution. In fact, here – where Paul tells a story about “those of Christ,”⁷⁹ namely that they “crucified” their flesh together with their passions and desires – we must take care that this supposedly abstract language does not blind us to the stunning fact that the Christians are now portrayed themselves even as *agents of crucifixion*, a role normally reserved for Roman soldiers.

From a narratological perspective, the passages examined here suggest that Paul reconfigures the Roman reality of crucifixion into a subversive storyworld in which the empire’s most feared instrument of control becomes both the locus of salvific transformation and a striking sign of imperial defeat. Rather than detailing “what really happened,” Paul repeatedly highlights aspects of the crucifixion that evoke new communal identities: the Galatians, by being “co-crucified,” transcend the normal victimhood of subjugated peoples and instead become agents or participants in a cruciform reality that robs Rome’s coercive tool of its power. These compact narrative moves, however brief, subvert dominant Roman storytelling on this subject and thus function as counternarratives, analogous to the alternative story of God’s triumph we saw in 2 Cor 2:14. In

⁷⁷ On καινὴ κτίσις in 2 Cor 5:17, see Dominika Kurek-Chomycz and Reimund Bieringer, “The Corinthian KAINAI KTIΣEΙΣ? Second Corinthians 5:17 and the Roman Refoundation of Corinth,” in *Stones, Bones, and the Sacred: Essays on Material Culture and Ancient Religion in Honor of Dennis E. Smith*, ed. Alan H. Cadwallader, ECL 21 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 195–220. Admittedly, we are dealing with a different context here and it is not clear whether the Galatians would have picked up on such a connection, even if for the Corinthians – living in a Roman colony – this might have been an obvious reference. (Cf. Heilig, *Hidden Criticism?*, 147 on the significance of the addressees. Cf. now also Heilig, *Apostle*, 38 and 42, as well as the comments on Phil 4:22.) Still, it seems to be at least notable that under the governor M. Annius Afrinus (49–54 CE) we can observe a “Claudification” of the province Galatia, with several cities taking on the name of the Emperor (Claudiolaodiceia, Claudioseleuceia, and Claudiconium). See Sherk, “Galatia,” 977. And on top of that we also need to take into account the fact that we have a real accumulation of small hints at a governing Roman narrative in the immediate literary context.

⁷⁸ Cf. Heilig, *Apostle*, 125–26, on Col 2:15.

⁷⁹ Cf. Archibald T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 3rd ed. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1919), 767 on the article. There are different means for creating such general narratives, which require the audience to fill in the concrete reference. There is a smooth transition to forms of potential *disnarration*, i.e., cases in which it is not at all clear if there even is a reference to happenings in the real world. On all this, cf. Heilig, *Paulus*, chapter 12.

each case, Paul's storytelling reassigned roles and outcomes – transforming cross-bearers into victors and depicting Rome's "world" itself as crucified. Such a re-interpretation not only allays fears of Roman repercussions but also re-centers the Galatians' allegiance around the Christ-event rather than imperial might. By foregrounding crucifixion as a dramatic emblem of divine sovereignty and communal identity, Paul crafts a dynamic counternarrative that both unmasks Roman pretensions to ultimate power and provides a powerful, future-oriented vision of a "new creation" in which the empire's claims are eclipsed by the cross.

4.2 *The Adoption of Nero*

Can we find other Rome-critical counternarratives in Galatians as well? The uncertainty concerning the addressees is probably one main factor that explains why since Hardin's 2008 monograph the whole approach has remained heuristically quite unfruitful. Since the addressees of Galatians are debated, one has to entertain two historical contexts at once. This is exemplified by Harrison's introduction to the subject,⁸⁰ where the author first discusses Ancyra (with a special focus on the *Res gestae divi Augusti*)⁸¹ and then Pisidian Antioch (Sebasteion and triumphal arch from the time of Augustus).⁸²

Unlike in the case of 2 Cor 2:14, it is particularly difficult to identify specific contemporary political discourses as the uncertainty with respect to *recipients* comes with a huge range of options for the *date* of Galatians. If it is addressed to the churches founded during the first missionary journey,⁸³ this opens up the possibility for a date as early as right before the apostolic council in 48 CE.⁸⁴ But anything after that, up until a date following Romans in 57 CE, is also discussed in the secondary literature, with a preference in German scholarship being given currently to a date between 2 Corinthians and Romans.⁸⁵ In what follows, I want to examine one example, Gal 4:1–2, where the date of Paul's letter seems to have a huge impact on the plausibility of a reading as a narrative that critically interacts with dominant Roman stories.

⁸⁰ Harrison, "Paul."

⁸¹ Harrison, "Paul," 166–68. If Paul might have read the Greek text there, this might indeed constitute an important source of his knowledge of Roman ideology and might have informed passages such as 2 Cor 2:14. Cf. also Heilig, *Triumph*, 128–29. Perhaps one might even be inclined to reverse the direction of argumentation: Given what Paul writes in 2 Cor 2:14, is it not likely that he has read the *Res gestae divi Augusti* and, hence, knows about the triumphal procession? Perhaps. But I think there are other explanations for his acquaintance with the ritual, which make this argument less compelling.

⁸² Harrison, "Paul," 168–73.

⁸³ I am still wondering, whether διαμένω in Gal 2:5 does not settle the question ... cf. Heilig, *Paulus*, 595–98.

⁸⁴ Ignoring the possibility of an even earlier date if one dates the first missionary journey to 34–40 CE, an option that Harrison, "Paul," 168, still entertains.

⁸⁵ Jörg Frey, "Galatians," in *Paul: Life, Setting, Work, Letters*, ed. Oda Wischmeyer, trans. Helen S. Heron with revisions by Dieter T. Roth (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 212.

At first sight, these two verses seem to constitute a quite innocent narrative as far as possible counterimperial overtones are concerned. On its most basic level, the passage is a story about heirs in general, i.e., it does not speak about specific events but states what is typically the case, sketching social regularities, expressing whole “event bundles” (which is why others would classify this as a description).⁸⁶ The mention of a “date set by the father” in v. 2 has caused some to suggest that this story about heirs is influenced by what Paul is going to tell about the Galatians in 4:3–6, i.e., the notion of the “fulness of time” in v. 4. For example, Moo speaks about a “backreading of the application into the illustration.”⁸⁷ Others have argued that the story that influences Gal 4:1–2 is not to be found in the immediate literary context but that it is, rather, the exodus narrative (in which we find both the motifs of liberation and adoption) which stands behind the entire section 4:1–7.⁸⁸ With so many stories suggested as illuminating contexts, one might ask: What then about the possibility of *contemporary Roman* stories having left their mark on Paul’s narration in Gal 4:1–2?

If we presuppose the current German majority opinion concerning the date, this implies that when Paul writes Galatians, Nero has already replaced Claudius as emperor – quite recently perhaps (Claudius died, poisoned or not, on October 13, 54 CE). Given the sensitivities that Paul has demonstrated in 2 Cor 2:14 for discourses associated with this imperatorial transition, an intriguing argument can be made about contemporaneous stories that involved the emperor, his heir, and even adoption – the topic that is introduced to the mix in vv. 3–7. In what follows, I will offer a brief sketch of this potential backdrop.

On February 25, 50 CE, Nero was adopted at the age of twelve years, having an advantage of three years over Britannicus, Claudius’s biological son from his marriage with Messalina.⁸⁹ At this point in time, Nero was still under a *tutor* since it was only in 51 CE that he took on the *toga virilis*, thus officially becoming an adult. It is notable that this transition happened even though Nero had not yet celebrated his 14th birthday, usually the required age, “so that he should appear qualified for a political career” (Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.41). It should be obvious that Gal 4:2 fits this rather unique situation shockingly well. For with respect to Nero it was indeed the case that he was “under guardians and managers until the

⁸⁶ On the distinction, cf. Heilig, *Paulus*, 116 and 355.

⁸⁷ Moo, *Galatians*, 923.

⁸⁸ James M. Scott, *Adoption as Sons: An Exegetical Investigation into the Background of ΥΙΟΘΕΣΙΑ in the Pauline Corpus*, WUNT II/48 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992). Cf. Scott J. Hafemann, “Paul and the Exile of Israel in Galatians 3–4,” in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, ed. James M. Scott, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 56 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 329–71.

⁸⁹ Cf. Hugh Lindsay, *Adoption in the Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 201.

‘date set by his father’” (Gal 4:2 ὑπὸ ἐπιτρόπους ἐστὶν καὶ οἰκονόμους ἄχρι τῆς προθεσμίας τοῦ πατρός)!⁹⁰

Against this backdrop and keeping in mind that κύριος as a title for the emperor was just gaining traction at that time,⁹¹ the designation of the prototypical heir in Gal 4:1 as “lord of everything” (κύριος πάντων) takes on quite a new significance! The same is true for the hyperbolic claim that there is no difference between the minor heir and a slave. If Betz can state, as if a matter of fact, that this exaggeration is due to the fact that “Paul coordinates the terms because of the equation of the pre-Christian situation of Christians with slavery,”⁹² one might just as well be justified in assuming that Paul could not resist indulging in the memory of a time when the new Emperor was still lacking significant powers and that he wanted to paint this scene in the most drastic way possible.⁹³

All that of course presupposes a context of utterance, in which the adoption of Nero might have been an issue in the first place. And indeed, Claudius’s elevation of Nero was of course highly controversial and the adoption itself an object of debate. Britannicus himself (who would later be murdered by Nero shortly before reaching his 14th birthday) reportedly addressed Nero after his adoption as “Domitius,” i.e., by his old family name (Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.41). And it is in any case, noteworthy – and has, in fact, been noted by ancient historians! – that the adoption of Nero caused significant legal troubles (reflected in Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.25) because a *datio in adaptionem* was not possible, as it required the biological father to carry out a fictitious sale before the praetor and Nero’s biological father had already been dead for a decade (he died in 40 CE). A regular adoption by *adrogatio* was also not possible for several reasons, one of which being the fact that Claudius already had a biological heir.⁹⁴ Even leaving that aside, the adoption was seen by contemporaries as being extraordinary as it put an end to a supposed 500-year-tradition of “no trace of an adoption in the patrician branch” (Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.25). Suetonius, *Claud.* 39.2 even claims that Claudius himself was well-aware of this and views the whole matter as a symptom of the Emperor’s mental confusion: “Just before his adoption of Nero, as if it were not bad enough to adopt a stepson⁹⁵ when he had a grown-up son of his own, he pub-

⁹⁰ Cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.10, where an otherwise unknown Asconius Labeo is mentioned as the tutor of Nero.

⁹¹ Cf. Heilig, *Apostle*, 125n62.

⁹² Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 203.

⁹³ To be sure, such a thought must be a travesty to those who assume that Rom 13:1-7 still reflects Paul’s optimism about the young Nero, a positive attitude that would only be crushed in 64 CE. But Rom 13 does not prove such a naivety. Rather, such a stance must be presupposed – against all odds – in order to read the passage in such a way. Cf. Heilig, *Apostle*, 113-16.

⁹⁴ Cf. Rudolf Leonhard, “Adoption 2,” *PW* 1.1 (1893): 399-400, and Rudolf Leonhard, “Adrogatio,” *PW* 1.1 (1893): 419-21.

⁹⁵ In 53 CE, Claudius had additionally become the stepfather of his adopted son Nero by marrying him to his daughter Octavia in order to promote his position.

licly declared more than once that no one had ever been taken into the Claudian family by adoption.”

Parallelomania? Well, maybe. But it is hard to deny that given a very specific context of utterance, it is difficult *not* to see the parallels between these stories. I am certain: If Paul did not think of these stories when writing the letter, at least some of the early readers of the letters, turning to the writing after having just exchanged the latest gossip about the imperial family, will have giggled. Depending on the interpretation theory that we adopt (cf. above), this meaning is just as “legitimate” as an object of study as are inferences concerning Paul’s supposed anti-imperial “intentions” as the storyteller of counternarratives.

5 Conclusions

In this contribution, I have tried to make a case for counternarratives as an important category in empire criticism of the NT and beyond (in empire criticism in general – i.e., with respect to other, non-Roman imperial power structures as well – and with respect to other kinds of subversion – i.e., other, non-imperial, fronts – within the NT). I have tried to lay an at least shaky foundation by looking at some Pauline stories through the lens of narratology, which allowed me to identify aspects of the text that are particularly telling when it comes to evaluating the supposed anti-imperial potential of these texts.

I closed my analysis with a clearly speculative example, one that encourages us to reconsider our assumptions about the interpretation theory we want to presuppose. And for those for whom “empire criticism” is indeed the *governing* concern (because they view biblical studies as part of a larger program of ideological critique, for example), there is, in fact, no problem in choosing the “appropriate” conception of meaning, as it fits this approach.⁹⁶ At the same time, I also want to close with this specific example because I believe that even within a classical “historical-critical” paradigm the quest for counternarratives in early Christian writings can be heuristically fruitful – even if we only come up with possible or plausible readings.

After all, when thinking about, for example, Paul’s supposed unease with the Roman Empire, we are moving from interpretation proper (what did Paul mean?) to using the text as evidence for more far-reaching reconstructions (what did Paul think?).⁹⁷ Reconstructing authorial intent is difficult enough,

⁹⁶ Cf. Kindt and Müller, “Interpretation,” and Kindt and Müller, “Theory,” on the norms that influence the choice of the concept of meaning. One cannot simply deduce the “right” kind of meaning from the interpretation itself. More fundamental hermeneutical dynamics are at work here. If one starts with the assumption that power needs to be scrutinized, choosing a conception of meaning that is more fruitful than authorial intention is indeed a legitimate move.

⁹⁷ Heilig, *Apostle*, 53.

trying to peek through small windows that give us a glance at the most private “hidden transcript” of the Pauline circle will *naturally* be fraught with even more complications. But all this is no reason to despair. While we may not be in the position to make definitive conclusions on any *particular* proposed dissonance with Roman ideology *in isolation*, establishing a multitude of such possible-to-likely readings will inevitably lead to the conclusion that something is actually there, and that we are not merely chasing an illusion. After all, probability theory teaches us that just as we cannot always be right when following probable tracks (something biblical scholars also seem to forget sometimes), analogously one of many improbable paths will ultimately lead us to our goal.⁹⁸ The exercise of our creative imagination in searching for counternarratives to the dominant Roman ideology in early Christian writings should thus be encouraged – not in opposition to but also, and not least, in the service of historical reconstruction.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Imagine you are a textual critic and for each variation unit you are 90 % certain that you chose the right variant. After only seven such decisions it is already more likely than not that in at least one case you made the wrong decision. Conversely, it is more likely than not that one of seven hypotheses concerning dissonances with Roman ideology will be correct, even if they each have only a 10 %-probability of being true.

⁹⁹ Against Ulrike Roth, review of *The Apostle and the Empire: Paul's Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome*, by Christoph Heilig, *JRS* 113 (2023): 215, who initially just argues that “the proposed method for contextualising the passage [2 Cor 2:14] through connections to a single event shows just how thin our knowledge base is.” I am fine with that! Then she continues: “It also shows disregard for sound historical argumentation.” That is quite a sweeping accusation (if not a serious challenge to my scholarly integrity). She explains: “To be sure, Paul might well have alluded to Claudius’ triumph. But this possibility cannot be established (rather than merely raised) through rough contemporaneity, let alone hypothetical eyewitness accounts or other, coinciding cult activity.” From the perspective of the philosophy of historiography, there is a fundamental distinction between raising hypotheses and confirming hypotheses. While the former may be accomplished by means of abduction, the latter one should follow Bayesian principles in order to be sound. What I do is clearly not *just* the generation of a hypothesis by means of abduction, nor can Bayesian confirmation be viewed as a clear-cut “establishing” of facts but rather as a probabilistic spectrum. It, thus, seems to me that Roth either misunderstands what I am doing or what confirmation (and, thus, “historical argumentation”) looks like – or both. I am grateful to Ulrike Roth for having entered into a quite detailed dialogue on several of the issues she raises in her review – some of which, I, personally, think, have little to do with my book and more with how she views NT studies as a whole. But I am still convinced that the kind of argument I provide in Heilig, *Apostle*, is both all we can do and at the same time still quite meaningful. I hope that this additional case study will further illustrate what I have in mind and why I view such analyses as being conducive to historical reconstruction. On the whole issue, see Theresa Heilig and Christoph Heilig, “Historical Methodology,” in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul: A Critical Examination of the Pauline Theology of N. T. Wright*, ed. Christoph Heilig, J. Thomas Hewitt, and Michael F. Bird, WUNT II/413 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016; 2nd ed.: Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 115–50.

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Speech Act Theory

Analyzing Subversive Speech Acts

Justin Winzenburg

On the 2 October 2021, NASCAR driver Brandon Brown raced to his first victory at Talladega Superspeedway in Lincoln, Alabama. While being interviewed about his win, Brown's voice was overshadowed by the crowd, who broke out into a chant. NBC Sports reporter, Kelli Stavast, likely did not know then that her (mis)interpretation of the crowd's chant would explode into an instant internet meme and important American political catchphrase. As the crowds increasingly got louder, Stavast rehearsed what she thought the crowd was saying, "Let's go Brandon," she noted, as if affirming the crowd's celebration of Brown's victory. This misunderstanding would result in the phrase counting as a new speech act. Stavast did not realize then that the crowd had been hurling an obscene four-letter insult at President Joe Biden, she simply misheard them – the crowd was certainly not saying, "Let's go Brandon."¹ Even after the memory of the phrase's origins quickly faded into oblivion, its use as an insult continues to become increasingly obvious and still has staying power to this day.

A certain amount of ingenuity is required to discern how words can be used to politically subvert.² "Let's go Brandon" conducts a speech act that is not easily discernible by attending to the definitions of words used in the phrase. Understanding the meaning of these words requires vast amounts of contextual awareness but can also appear obvious to those who have proper background information and context. This case illustrates how speech acts can be used to subvert. In this example, the language is not "coded" to avoid persecution (this matter will be discussed more below). While this essay is primarily interested in NT empire criticism, this contemporary American example will help to illustrate the process of detecting subversive speech. Speech act theory can help to account for this process.

¹ For a detailed account of the origin of "Let's go Brandon," see Heather Schwedel, "The Story Behind 'Let's Go Brandon,' the Secretly Vulgar Chant Suddenly Beloved by Republicans," *Slate*, 22 October 2021. I owe thanks to Dr. John Anthony Dunne for initially suggesting to me the usefulness of the "Let's go Brandon" phrase for thinking about speech acts and empire criticism.

² Ingenuity is important in discerning indirect speech acts, John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 31.

The main aim of this essay is to introduce readers to the usefulness of speech act theory (SAT) for empire criticism. In the next section, I will explain *which* important features of SAT are most useful for evaluating claims of empire criticism. This section includes some distillation and expansion of my earlier work on SAT, Ephesians, and empire.³ I will follow each feature of SAT with some comments on *how* they are methodologically useful for empire criticism. In the final section of this essay, I will provide a case study on Mark 5, illustrating how these elements of SAT can be useful in evaluating whether the text exhibits subversive speech acts which were critical of the Roman Empire.

1 Speech Act Theory and Empire Criticism

First introduced by Austin,⁴ and later expanded upon by Searle,⁵ SAT is a philosophy of language developed within the field of pragmatics. Four areas of SAT are most useful for evaluating empire criticism within texts: 1) distinctions between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, 2) a reflection on the role that context plays in performing various kinds of speech acts, including *mutual contextual beliefs*, 3) the function of indirect speech acts, and 4) understanding how speech acts can function in relation to institutional facts.

1.1 Locutionary, Illocutionary, Perlocutionary Acts

SAT identifies three interrelated components of an utterance: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts.⁶ Any given speech utterance(s) contains each of these acts. These acts represent components of a single utterance, not three separate utterances. *Locutionary acts* occur when sounds are used⁷ to form words that have a certain sense and reference, whereas *illocutionary acts* are defined by the performative function of their locution, i.e., to warn, threaten, promise, direct, assert, etc. In other words, illocutionary acts accomplish what one wants to do with locutions. For example, the sentence “the ice is thin over there”⁸ can be broken down into its locutionary and illocutionary

³ Justin Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire: An Evaluation of the Epistle's Subversion of Roman Imperial Ideology*, WUNT II/573 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 44–64.

⁴ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1975).

⁵ See especially, John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

⁶ Austin was the first to introduce this terminology: Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 94–108.

⁷ This is especially the case with verbal speech acts, but speech acts can also be written, and so it is appropriate to refer to written words as locutions.

⁸ Quentin Skinner, “Conventions and the Understanding of Speech Acts,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 20.79 (1970): 129; Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 48, 57–58.

components. Locutionarily, the sentence has a certain sense and reference. One could examine the definitions of each word and its reference: which “ice” and “over there” are being referred to, how “thin” functions adjectivally, etc. Understanding locutionary components in the sentence is important in discerning its broader illocutionary and perlocutionary functions. However, examining these elements of the locution does not always easily resolve what illocutionary act is in view. In the case of “the ice is thin over there,” does this utterance intend to signify a *warning* not to go on the ice because it is thin? Is the sentence meant as a *directive* for where to use an auger for ice fishing? Is it *mocking* a boyfriend who has upset his girlfriend, as if he is “on thin ice?”⁹ Is it meant as a subtle *request* for payment for breaking two feet of ice down to one inch in preparation for a “polar plunge?” Each of these possible illocutionary acts are performed using the exact same words, so mining the locutionary content may not resolve the ambiguity over which illocution is intended. This fact raises the possibility that the illocutionary force of a sentence may not be easily discernable in its locutionary content. I will come back to this later when examining how locutions, illocutions, and perlocutions can inform empire criticism. At this point, it is important to note that all locutions also perform certain illocutions, even if they are simple acts of claiming, informing, asserting, or denying. A high amount of complexity can be involved in construing illocutionary acts. Austin’s initial formulation of locutionary and illocutionary acts serves as a helpful distinction between an utterance’s sounds, sense, and reference, and what act it performs in the saying of it.

The third component of a speech act is its *perlocutionary act*. Perlocutionary acts refer to the hoped-for effects that the speaker intends to impress upon the hearer(s). These acts are directly tied to the illocutionary force of the utterance.¹⁰ E.g., By yelling (locution) “the ice is thin over there,” I warned (illocution) her in hopes of persuading her (perlocution) to immediately move off the ice. The successful uptake of an utterance occurs when the hearer appropriately understands the locution as performing the intended illocution and appropriately responds with the hoped-for perlocutionary act.¹¹ If any of these responses do not occur, the speech act has misfired.¹² While actual perlocutionary effects upon

⁹ Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 48.

¹⁰ On perlocution, see Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 101; Searle, *Speech Acts*, 25; Quentin Skinner, “Motives, Intentions, and Interpretation of Texts,” *New Literary History* 3.2 (1972): 402–3; Skinner, “Conventions,” 118; Yueguo Gu, “The Impasse of Perlocution,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 20.5 (1993): 405–32; Robert N. Gaines, “Doing By Saying: Toward a Theory of Perlocution,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1979): 207–17.

¹¹ Uptake occurs when the intended illocutionary force is rightly perceived by the audience, see Skinner, “Conventions,” 118; Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 116–17; Lyn Nixon, *Evoking Story for Transformation: New Testament Quotation at the Reader-Author Intersection* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, Forthcoming).

¹² On misfires, see Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 14, 25–38; J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 250; Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 50.

recipients of an utterance are often outside the control of the speaker, it is possible to examine the hoped-for perlocutionary effect derived *from* the speaker (referred to here as the perlocutionary act), which is a necessary component of the successful performance of a speech act.¹³

The identification of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts are important in assessing possible subversive speech acts within the NT. The presence of references to the Roman Empire, imperial ideology, and/or potential parallels to it within NT texts has been hotly debated.¹⁴ This dispute is largely conducted on the locutionary level of an utterance. Disagreements occur over whether certain words in the NT refer to imperial elements, or whether these words intend to invoke ideas that parallel imperial ideology. In both cases, the dispute is mostly over sense and reference, which are aspects of an utterance's locutionary content. For example, 1) Does εἰρήνη καὶ ὀσφάλεια in 1 Thess 5:3 invoke an imperial slogan (*pax et securitas*)?¹⁵ 2) Are anti-imperial sentiments expressed when Jesus is identified as κύριος?¹⁶ Clarifying the locutionary sense and reference is an important step in textual interpretation. In theory, empire criticism may be easily identifiable by the explicit use of certain words and concepts. To return to our contemporary example, insulting Joe Biden could be accomplished more straightforwardly than saying “Let's go Brandon” if the subject and the verb were directly articulated verbatim, rather than using these other words to perform the same illocution. If the insult directly named Joe Biden and included the vulgar four-lettered expletive (as was the case in the original utterance at Talladega Superspeedway), not much more than a clear understanding of the locution would be needed to understand this phrase as a speech act intending to criticize.¹⁷ Far more information is needed to count “Let's go Brandon” in the same way. If such explicit criticism of the Roman

¹³ Nixon, *Evoking Story*. Cohen refers to these kinds of perlocutions as “direct,” Ted Cohen, “Illocutions and Perlocutions,” *Foundations of Language* 9 (1973): 496.

¹⁴ See especially John M. G. Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 363–87; Laura Robinson, “Hidden Transcripts? The Supposedly Self-Censoring Paul and Rome as Surveillance State in Modern Pauline Scholarship,” *NTS* 67 (2021): 55–72.

¹⁵ See especially, Joel R. White, “‘Peace and Security’ (1 Thessalonians 5.3): Is It Really a Roman Slogan?,” *NTS* 59 (2013): 382–95.

¹⁶ *Mart. Pol.* may provide an interesting example of this tension within the early Roman Empire. See also, Joseph D. Fantin, *Lord of the Entire World: Lord Jesus, a Challenge to Lord Caesar?* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011); Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 187–93, 224–26. For how numismatics can illuminate this conversation, see the brief discussion by Michael Theophilos in his essay on numismatics in this volume.

¹⁷ More will be said below about how the context of the utterance contributes to discerning meaning. Even presuming the same sense and reference noted above, it is not impossible for “Let's go Brandon” to function ironically. E.g., if Biden had won a second term, and as the election results came in Biden himself had said the phrase in mockery of his opponents who uttered it, the phrase would function as ironic triumph rather than criticism.

Empire were evident in the NT, there would likely be more consensus about NT empire criticism.¹⁸ However, not all subversive speech acts are identifiable via its locutionary content. NT empire criticism has often analyzed locutionary content at the expense of attending to illocutions and perlocutions. Most debates about NT empire criticism cannot be resolved by examining locutionary content alone. Even if the sense and reference of *εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια*, and *κύριος* are convincingly tied to imperial ideology, it remains to be seen whether NT texts that invoke them perform subversive speech acts rather than pay homage or reinforce imperial concepts. To this end we must turn to illocutionary acts.

Discerning subversive speech acts often requires paying careful attention to illocutionary acts. There are numerous ways of describing these acts. A far too narrow range of illocutionary acts have been considered within empire criticism of the NT. A more nuanced and exhaustive range of possibilities of what might count as subversive illocutionary acts needs to be more carefully catalogued. I attempted to scratch the surface on this sort of inventory in my work on *Ephesians and Empire*. My previous list of these kinds of illocutions is worth reproducing here:

Insulting, critiquing, undermining, weakening, reversing, attacking, questioning, protesting, making fun of, disturbing, plotting against, challenging, disrespecting, thwarting, parodying, resignifying, threatening, unsettling, sabotaging, destabilizing, overthrowing, overturning, toppling, ruining, damaging, ousting, displacing, disrupting, or wreaking havoc on.¹⁹

Many more illocutions, which can be used to conduct empire critical speech acts, could be added: exposing, accusing, disempowering, sneering, defying, renouncing, discrediting, confronting, mocking, refusing, depriving, ridiculing, blaming, denouncing, deriding, violating, delegitimizing, flouting, disregarding, repudiating, impugning, dismissing, scorning, counteracting, taunting, marginalizing, opposing, denying, disabling, invalidating.

Empire critical interpreters most often detect a limited range of illocutions, e.g., subverting, criticizing, parodying, challenging, and countering. For ex-

¹⁸ It is equally difficult to discern empire critical speech acts in OT prophetic texts that have often been deemed to contain them (e.g., the book of Daniel), Philip R. Davies, “Daniel in the Lion’s Den,” in *Images of Empire*, ed. Loveday Alexander, JSOTSS 122 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 160–78; Alexandra Frisch, *The Danielic Discourse on Empire in Second Temple Literature*, JSJSupp 176 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

¹⁹ Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 59. My internal examiner for my PhD thesis, Dr. William Atkinson, raised the important question of how silence might function subversively. While outside the scope of this essay, more work needs to be done to explore the multitude of ways that this kind of subversion might have occurred in the ancient world. Two examples might be of interest in this regard: 1) Polycarp’s refusal to name Caesar as Lord (*Mart. Pol.*, 8.2), and 2) John Barclay’s claim that Paul’s challenge to Rome might have been located in not naming (or focusing) on it, presumably relegating it to the power of *δαμόνια*, Barclay, *Pauline Churches*, 386–87.

ample, Christoph Heilig, in his work on hidden criticism in the NT rightly notes that there are “varying kinds of criticism,” but could have done more to develop this idea,²⁰ cataloging a broader range of kinds of subversive speech acts. Interpreters of the NT could more carefully attend to these broad illocutions that might constitute subversive speech acts, which would also help to discern speech acts that have no subversive intent. A narrow focus on a limited range of illocutions in empire studies may be due in part to the fact that some of the illocutionary acts listed above are not present within the NT. Attending more carefully to the illocutions performed in NT speech acts can also provide a much-needed corrective to overestimating empire criticism.

Another area worth considering is the relationship between the performance of subversive speech acts and perlocutionary effects. What hoped-for utterance effects should we look for in empire critical speech acts? There is a temptation within empire criticism to focus attention on whether Roman authorities²¹ might have been *offended* at the discovery of concepts present in the NT. *Offending* is one important perlocutionary effect to consider in subversive speech acts. However, there are significant problems with reducing empire critical perlocutionary effects to acts of offending since it is only one possible hoped-for result of a subversive utterance. Further, it often presumes that the audience of NT texts includes imperial authorities.²² A wider range of associated perlocutionary effects should be considered within empire criticism.²³ For example, while using speech acts to destabilize Roman power might offend imperial authorities, when these speech acts are directed at early Christ assemblies their hoped-for effect could positively reinforce in-group identity with no intent of offending.²⁴ Similarly, parodying empire might hope to offend if it is meant to be overheard by authorities but could anticipate laughter from non-authorities

²⁰ Christoph Heilig, *Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 131–34.

²¹ More could be done within NT empire criticism to clearly define what sort of “authorities” are in view, since there was a wide range of people involved in imperial administration, both in Rome and across the Mediterranean. Furthermore, it is also possible that anti-imperial speech acts may have had a wide range of hoped-for perlocutionary effects when directed at certain imperial administrators and/or their allies. Personally, I cannot detect any anti-imperial speech acts clearly intended for imperial administrators or authorities within the NT.

²² Barclay’s observation that imperial authorities were not opening mail directed at early Christian assemblies is noteworthy, see Barclay, *Pauline Churches*, 380–83. For my own brief rebuttal as it relates to NT prison epistles, see Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 60, 103. Even if prison epistles may have been an exception whereby some agent of imperial administration had access to texts that have been included in the NT, these texts were not directed *at* these imperial administrators.

²³ I identify these perlocutions as “associated” because they are connected to the successful uptake of the illocutionary act. In other words, if the audience successfully understands the illocutionary act, what associated effects does the speaker hope to achieve upon the recipients in light of the successful performance of the speech act?

²⁴ On social identity theory and empire criticism, see Chris Porter’s essay in this volume.

(or authorities) who agree with its depiction.²⁵ Offending and humoring are only two possible associated perlocutionary acts that can accompany subversive illocutionary acts, others should be considered: Alarming, persuading, convincing, reinforcing (against), inciting, agitating, arousing suspicion, inflaming, aggravating, disturbing, enraging, infuriating, encouraging, emboldening, inspiring, assuring, comforting, illuminating, and rejoicing. Revelation serves as a potent example of the performance of subversive perlocutionary acts that are not intended to offend. Directed towards seven assemblies of Christ-followers, Revelation's anti-imperial thrust appears to *comfort*, but also hopes to effect *rejoicing*. Carey notes that "Rev 18:20 invites the audience to rejoice over its [Babylon/Rome] destruction. John taunts Babylon's mourners along with the city. Even as they put dust on their heads and cry out for her, a voice (probably John's) calls the audience to rejoice (18:19–20)."²⁶ I will draw out anti-imperial perlocutions in more detail in the case study on Mark 5 below, especially as it relates to perlocutionary acts that provide comfort and hope.

1.2 Context and Speech Acts

SAT establishes a theoretical framework for understanding how context is related to the performance of certain speech acts. Examining the role of context in textual interpretation is not exactly novel.²⁷ However, SAT can help to account for the relationship between locutions, illocutions, perlocutions, and context by using the formula $X=Y+Z$ in C.²⁸ A locution (X) can *count as* the performance of an illocution (Y) with an associated hoped for perlocution (Z) within a certain context (C). This basic articulation stresses the importance of the role of context in the performance of speech acts. The exact same locution (X) can *count as* an entirely different illocution (Y) with a different corresponding perlocution (Z) within a different context (C). For example, this concept helps to explain how the simple locution "out" (X) can count as both an order (Y_1) and a declaration (Y_2) in different contexts (C_1) and (C_2). "Out" (X) can function as an order (Y_1) when uttered by a pet owner to their dog who has just made a mess on the kitchen floor (C_1). The hoped for perlocution (Z_1) would likely include the departure of

²⁵ One interesting example of the presence of this kind of speech acts is found in Judges 3:15–26, mocking Moabite king Eglon which was intended to arouse laughter among its ancient Israelite audience, see Jodi Magness, "Toilets and Toilet Humor in the Story of Eglon's Murder by Ehud (Judges 3:15–26)," *JBL* 142.1 (2023): 65–89.

²⁶ Greg Carey, *Elusive Apocalypse: Reading Authority in the Revelation to John*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 15 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999), 157.

²⁷ Most hermeneutics textbooks contain a section dedicated to examining the role of context in interpreting the NT.

²⁸ John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995). I have added the perlocutionary component (Z), which Searle overlooks, and which I also overlooked in my earlier use of Searle's formula, Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*.

the dog to the backyard.²⁹ Whereas the same locution “out” (X) can count as a declaration (Y₂) when uttered by an umpire on a baseball field as a baserunner is sliding into second base (C₂).³⁰ The hoped for perlocution here (Z₂) is that the runner would jog off the field and into the dugout. This formula can help demonstrate how “the ice is thin over there” (X) can count as directing, warning, mocking, requesting (Y) in varied contexts (C). Examining the relationship between speech acts and context can be further illuminated by pairing X=Y+Z in C with the idea of *mutually contextual beliefs* (MCBs).³¹ MCBs are “the contextual beliefs that figure in speakers’ intentions and hearers’ inferences [which] must be mutual if communication is to take place.”³² These beliefs consist of the shared information that both a speaker and hearer must possess for the successful uptake of the speech act. The absence of MCBs can quickly lead to misunderstanding, sometimes with devastating effects. If I yell “the ice is thin over there” (X) to warn the hearer (Y) in hopes of getting her to immediately step off the ice (Z), one necessary MCB is that the hearer is standing on ice. If the hearer believes they are standing on land, she might well understand that I performed an illocutionary act of warning but may not find it expedient to step off the ice (Z). In this case, my warning has misfired because of the lack of an important shared MCB. Further, the phrase “I love you like my brother” can perform several illocutionary acts depending on its context and MCBs, “it might function as an assurance, admission, answer to a question, promise, or assertion.”³³ If a woman utters this locution to a man who is romantically interested in her, its function as an assertion (that she, in fact, does not love him romantically) can have a devastating perlocutionary effect (Z), but also effectively communicate her disinterest. If uttered by a soldier on the battlefield to another soldier, the same locution might perform an entirely different illocutionary and perlocutionary act. In each case, certain MCBs need to be present to properly discern the speech act. In the first case, there needs to be a mutual understanding that “brother” is never expected to be the object of romantic love, otherwise the man might believe that the woman is affirming her romantic affection for him. In the second case, there needs to be a mutual understanding that the speaker’s brother is not despised, otherwise the speech act might be interpreted as an insult; “I love you like my brother (who I actually hate)!”. These examples again highlight the role of context (C) in the performance of illocutionary acts (Y) and perlocutionary

²⁹ Examining speech acts directed at animals adds a further level of complexity that I do not have the space to address here, but the example still serves to appropriately illustrate X=Y+Z in C.

³⁰ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 59.

³¹ Kent Bach and Robert M. Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, England: MIT Press, 1979).

³² Bach and Harnish, *Linguistic Communication*, 5.

³³ Bach and Harnish, *Linguistic Communication*, 5.

acts (Z), and the necessity of the presence of MCBs which help to ensure that the speech act does not misfire.

Certain MCBs are necessary to decipher the meaning of “Let’s go Brandon.” Interestingly, the phrase’s origin story is not a necessary MCB,³⁴ even though awareness of it could help illuminate the phrase. That the phrase is coded, that “Brandon” represents Joe Biden, that Joe Biden is a real person and former President of the United States, and that “Let’s go” really has an underlying four-letter expletive behind it are all important MCBs. Something important is lost in discerning a speaker’s use of the phrase if any of these MCBs are absent. If someone did not know that Brandon=Joe Biden, that person might well understand the phrase as an insult (if they have heard it used enough in such a way) but have no idea that the phrase performs a subversive speech act. Something is lost in communication without that important MCB, but MCBs do not stand on their own. They require an awareness of context (C). All these MCBs can be held by a speaker and hearer, but the context might dictate that the speech act functions as an ironic taunt rather than an insult.³⁵ Importantly, SAT stresses that utterance interpretation involves discerning how locutions (X) perform illocutions (Y) and perlocutions (Z) in a given context (C), and that there are necessary MCBs between speakers and hearers in order to ensure the successful uptake of a speech act. Each of these components are useful for empire criticism.³⁶

Empire critical interpreters have too often overestimated the presence of MCBs related to imperial ideology by assuming that these concepts were static and universally accessible across the Mediterranean. Clint Burnett has observed this tendency among characterizations of Julio-Claudian imperial divine honors within empire criticism.³⁷ Burnett offers an important corrective for NT empire criticism, especially in the case of NT epistles,³⁸ because he examines local and regional contexts within given eras to better grasp what could be reasonably expected to be understood by audiences to whom these NT texts are directed. Interpreters cannot necessarily presume that the presence of certain ideological components within one place in the Roman Empire would be equally under-

³⁴ Anecdotally, I asked some American friends if they knew the meaning of the phrase. Most did, without knowing anything about the origins of the phrase.

³⁵ Again, this could be the case if Joe Biden or his supporters said the phrase as a sort of victory statement in defeat of his opponents who utter the phrase as an insult. This use could also function as a sort of resignification.

³⁶ The terms “speakers” and “hearers” can be expanded in textual analysis to indicate authors and audiences.

³⁷ D. Clint Burnett, *Paul and Divine Imperial Honors: Christ, Caesar, and the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024), 13–14.

³⁸ Interpreting gospels might require a different approach to MCBs since they may have been produced in conversation with wider literary culture and have been initially directed at other authors: Robyn Faith Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

stood within another place, even in the same era. SAT can supplement Burnett's work by introducing the language of *mutual contextual beliefs*. If it can be shown which components of imperial ideology are MCBs within the author and audiences' local contexts, it increases the likelihood that these proposed ideological components *could* be in view within these texts. This does not answer yet whether they were in view but opens the interpreter to the possibility that such an engagement is historically plausible.

Some recent studies have carefully examined the relationship between local imperial contexts and NT texts. Harrison's study on Romans focuses on local imperial context, including monuments in the city of Rome, helpfully attending to its cityscape where knowledge of these particular imperial ideologies and monuments are most plausible.³⁹ Similarly, Nasrallah's examination of obelisks within the city of Rome provides a plausible backdrop for understanding Paul's projection of time for the recipients of Romans.⁴⁰ The numerous volumes in *The First Urban Churches* series, of which Harrison is a contributing editor, also investigates how local material remains and ancient literary sources can inform our understanding of NT texts addressed to recipients in particular cities.⁴¹ More work needs to be done to continue to carefully assess how material and literary cultural remains can inform understandings of local and regional imperial contexts.⁴² The work contained in these projects can help detect some elements which might contribute to MCBs that can be expected to have been held between author(s) and recipient(s).

There are limitations to focusing on MCBs when they are centered on historical flesh-and-blood authors and audiences. The usefulness of this approach becomes less clear in situations where it is difficult to discern the provenance of a text, its historical author(s), and audience(s). Furthermore, even in circumstances where there is some consensus regarding the historical authorship of a text, and its provenance (e.g., Paul's letter to the Romans), there is often very little

³⁹ James R. Harrison, *Reading Romans with Roman Eyes: Studies on the Social Perspective of Paul*, Paul in Critical Contexts (Langham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020).

⁴⁰ Laura Salah Nasrallah, *Archaeology and the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 203–11.

⁴¹ As of early 2025, the series has released seven volumes, including: Methodological Foundations (vol. 1), Roman Corinth (vol. 2), Ephesus (vol. 3), Roman Philippi (vol. 4), Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea (vol. 5), Rome and Ostia (vol. 6), Thessalonica (vol. 7). Harrison (along with Bradley J. Bitner) has also continued the *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* series, editing its most recent volumes: James R. Harrison and Bradley J. Bitner, eds., *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity 1IA: Texts from Ephesus*, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2024); James R. Harrison and Bradley J. Bitner, eds., *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity 1IB: Essays on Ephesus*, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2025).

⁴² On the use of material culture in empire criticism, see the following essays in this volume: Michael Theophilos (Numismatics), Clint Burnett (Inscriptions), Harry Maier (Iconography), and Gillian Asquith (Papyrology).

historical record of the lives of these authors and audiences. Further, the complexities of textual production, including contributions from (often enslaved) scribes (e.g., Tertius in Rom 16:22) and co-authors, and the eventual broader circulation of these texts in early Christian assemblies raises some concerns around using an approach that focuses too narrowly on the MCBs possessed by a singular author or audience within a singular location.⁴³ In these circumstances, I propose that more attention be given to implied authors and audiences.⁴⁴ These constructs, the authorial and audience portraits presumed within a text, are open to interpretation. However, when MCBs are tied to implied authors and audiences, we can begin to ask what *mutual contextual beliefs* need to be in place for a particular interpretation of an NT text to work, including empire critical ones. Whether these understandings can be tied to definite particular historical authors and audiences is less relevant than whether it is historically plausible that the projected authorial and audience portraits presume these MCBs in order for an empire critical interpretation to work.

I have previously claimed that the invocation of captivity, taking captives, and gift giving in Eph 4:8–10 might have functioned as a subversive speech act, reversing imperial notions of conquest and captivity for recipients familiar with its Roman iterations.⁴⁵ This interpretation suggests that the text performs a speech act of reversal or parody, potentially undermining, critiquing, opposing, and/or delegitimizing Roman imperial notions of conquest by depicting Jesus Messiah as conquering captivity, generously dispensing χάρις (4:7) via gift-giving, and ascending ὑπεράνω πάντων τῶν οὐρανῶν (4:10), contrasting imperial conceptualization of reception of gifts in spoils of war, and images of deification. In this reading, there are locutionary components that may parallel imperial notions: χάρις (4:7), δωρεά (4:7), αἰχμαλωτεύω (4:8), αἰχμαλωσία (4:8), διδώμι (4:8), and ἀναβαίνω (4:9). However, I could have done more to demonstrate what kind of MCBs must be present for such concepts to be understood as subversive illocutionary acts. Ephesians is particularly challenging in this regard because of the questions surrounding authorship, audience, and date. A narrow focus on Paul, Ephesus, or residents of Ephesus for detecting MCBs is inadvisable. Focusing on the implied author and audience can be more useful, helping to articulate what sort of MCBs would need to be presumed for this interpretation to work.

For the locutionary concepts mentioned above to be interpreted as empire criticism, these concepts would have to have constituted MCBs that were understood to have been specifically derived from imperial ideology rather than other

⁴³ Candida Moss, *God's Ghostwriters: Enslaved Christians and the Making of the Bible* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2024).

⁴⁴ Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 34–43.

⁴⁵ Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 193–98, 226–30.

adjacent or unrelated conceptual frameworks. Since these locutions could draw on a wide range of other contextual images, identifying imperial ideological components as the underlying MCB here is by no means certain. Further, for these concepts to have a particular empire critical flair, it would need to be demonstrated that the conceptual MCBs underlying these terms were *Roman* and *imperial* in nature rather than invoking other concepts within the ancient world. Ultimately the sheer volume of corresponding concepts in this passage which could invoke imperial ideology makes it worth exploring potential imperial ideological parallels as MCBs. Even if these concepts invoke imperial elements within the shared MCBs between the author and audience, more needs to be done to demonstrate that the illocutionary intent of these speech acts challenge Rome rather than reinforce it. Some interpreters have suggested that Ephesians might reinforce imperial rule by envisioning Jesus as supplanting *Roman* imperial rule.⁴⁶ In that way, these speech acts might, in some respects, reinforce imperialism rather than subvert it.

Other motifs in this passage would need to constitute MCBs that are particularly tied to imperial ideology for the passage to function as empire criticism. The text's depiction of gift giving may either reaffirm or contrast concepts broader than the taking spoils of war in imperial captivity. I had not earlier explored imperial patronage and acts of imperial generosity as a possible motif invoked in this passage. If so, the text may reassert images of imperial patronage rather than provide a reversal of imperial conquest. Further, the text may not intend to engage with *imperial* patronage at all. Similarly, ascent imagery has many possible conceptual antecedents. Ascension language may invoke some aspects of deification but constitutes only one possible shared framework (MCB) of the author and audience, and this would need to be further established rather than presumed. More work could be done to tie historical evidence to potential MCBs which can enrich what shared knowledge needs to be in place among authors and recipients for empire critical interpretations to work. This raises further questions about where these MCBs may have been floating around, in what eras, and with what connections to imperial motifs, in order for these MCBs to be brought into conversation with empire criticism.

1.3 Indirect Speech Acts

The effective performance of a speech act can occur in such a way that the utterance's illocutionary force is not easily detectable in its locutionary content. This case is often the result of the locution omitting an explicit performative verb

⁴⁶ Jennifer G. Bird, "The Letter to the Ephesians," in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 265–80.

(e.g., “I promise ...”).⁴⁷ These kinds of speech acts are indirect.⁴⁸ Indirect speech acts are often “oblique” and performed with some “finesse.”⁴⁹ Skinner introduces the following example: “I wonder if you would mind accompanying me to the police-station, sir?” At face value, the words “wonder,” “accompanying,” and “sir,” could lead one to conclude that the illocutionary force is a gentle enquiry.⁵⁰ However, an order or a command may be in view, even though the locutionary content does not contain an explicit performative verb indicating either.

The absence of an explicit performative verb is often not the result of needing to conceal information. Indirect speech acts can be used as an effective means of communication. In the case of many indirect speech acts, something would be lost in its communication if the illocutionary act was made explicit by the use of performative verbs.⁵¹ Skinner notes several kinds of speech acts which fit this model: bullying, flirting, mocking, alluding, flattering, patronizing.⁵² In other words, to directly state, “I flirt ...,” “I allude ...,” “I flatter ...,” is less effective than doing so by using indirect speech acts. Saying “I order you to come with me to the police-station” clearly identifies the illocutionary act via the inclusion of a performative verb, but an indirect speech act might accomplish the order far more effectively, especially if employing politeness diffuses a potentially explosive situation. In this case, explicitly avowing the illocutionary act, “I order you to ...,” might cause the speech act to misfire if it risks interrupting the successful performance of the perlocutionary act, namely persuading the accused to accompany the officer to the police-station.

To return to our earlier example, “Let’s go Brandon” is a powerful indirect speech act. Irrespective of the fact that it came from a misunderstanding, its successful function as an insult is accomplished by concealing its explicit illocutionary force. Its explicit linguistic equivalent is far more brazen and indiscreet and cannot effectively or appropriately be used in some social situations. Further, to make its object explicit might be less effective in reinforcing the in-group political identity of its proponents.

⁴⁷ Skinner, “Conventions,” 123; Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 61–62. The presence of an explicit performative verb, e.g., “I promise” does not guarantee that its illocution is clear apart from context. “I promise to pay you back” could function as a threat rather than a promise.

⁴⁸ Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 30–57; Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 60–62. Austin refers to these kinds of speech acts as “implicit,” Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 32.

⁴⁹ Skinner, “Conventions,” 121–22.

⁵⁰ Skinner, “Conventions,” 122.

⁵¹ Skinner, “Conventions,” 122; Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 61. These kinds of speech acts have some overlap with the notion of “figured speech.” For further detail on figured speech, see Najeeb Haddad’s essay in this volume (as well as his two previous works on Paul and Empire), and Frederick Ahl, “The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome,” *AJP* 105 (1984): 174–208.

⁵² Skinner, “Conventions,” 123; Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 61–62.

Much has been made of Richard Horsley's empire critical interpretations, which sometimes assert the use of hidden transcripts and coded speech within the NT because of fear of potential persecution.⁵³ Robinson, Barclay, and Haddad have all rightly called these portraits into question.⁵⁴ SAT adds an important contribution to this conversation by explaining how language can conduct indirect speech acts which are motivated more by the performance of effective communication than fear of persecution. I sympathize with Robinson, Barclay, and Haddad's hesitation⁵⁵ in attributing persecution as a motivator for subversive, coy, or cryptographic speech in the NT.⁵⁶ Barclay rightly critiques Wright for suggesting that Paul's anti-imperial criticism is "never made explicit: they lie underneath the text, not on its surface."⁵⁷ This critique offers a helpful caution against overestimating the presence of hidden transcripts in the NT out of fear of persecution, but there is an equal danger of dismissing indirect speech acts in preference for direct ones, even though such explicit speech acts would obstruct their effective performance and uptake. While fear of persecution might warrant such indirect speech acts, it is only one possible reason why subversive speech acts in the NT might be difficult to detect on the locutionary level of the utterance. Interpreters must remain open to the possibility of discovering subversive speech acts in the NT which are not easily detectable on the locutionary level of communication.

That empire critical approaches have largely overlooked indirect speech acts is unfortunate, especially since attempts have recently been made at nuancing NT empire criticism by highlighting the broad ranges of critiques that might exist in these texts. Christoph Heilig helpfully analyzes different kinds of criticism,⁵⁸ and notes possible "layers" of hidden transcripts in Paul.⁵⁹ However, some of his observations are not directly applicable to empire criticism. His focus on how

⁵³ See e.g., Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*, SemeiaSt 48 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2004); Robinson, "Hidden Transcripts," 56, fn. 4.

⁵⁴ See both Laura Robinson's and Najeeb Haddad's essays in this volume. Robinson, see also "Hidden Transcripts"; Barclay, *Pauline Churches*; Najeeb T. Haddad, *Paul, Politics, and New Creation: Reconsidering Paul and Empire* (Langham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021); Najeeb T. Haddad, *Paul and Empire Criticism: Why and How?* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023). For a balanced approach to hidden criticism, see Heilig, *Hidden Criticism*.

⁵⁵ I am particularly persuaded by Haddad's work on figured speech; see his chapter in this volume, also Haddad, *Paul, Politics, and New Creation*, 43–78; Haddad, *Paul and Empire Criticism*, 49.

⁵⁶ On cryptograms, see Norman Beck, *Anti-Roman Cryptograms in the New Testament: Hidden Transcripts of Hope and Liberation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009).

⁵⁷ Barclay, *Pauline Churches*, 370.

⁵⁸ Heilig, *Hidden Criticism*, 131–34.

⁵⁹ Christoph Heilig, *The Apostle and Empire: Paul's Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 42.

speech acts can affect the speaker,⁶⁰ as well as the ways that critiques often entail direct confrontations spoken in front of the affected party⁶¹ are less relevant to NT empire criticism. On the other hand, his work on narratives in Paul carefully differentiates between “textualization strategies” and “text functions.”⁶² Drawing on pragmatics and SAT, he distinguishes between “propositional content” and illocutionary force, emphasizing how this differentiation illuminates what speakers do with their utterances in texts.⁶³ Heilig intersects his linguistic work with SAT to show how utterances function in narratives.⁶⁴ His observation that rhetorical questions often function as assertions is helpful in illustrating how locutionary content can serve an illocutionary function not obvious in the propositional content of the sentence.⁶⁵ Further, in discussing Paul’s attempted influence on the Galatian “troublemakers,” Heilig exhibits an awareness of SAT by drawing on the idea of perlocutions.⁶⁶ Heilig’s knowledge of SAT makes his lack of engagement with it in his most recent work on empire criticism, *The Apostle and the Empire*, unfortunate.⁶⁷ Attending to SAT could have enriched his assessment of Paul and empire, especially in highlighting SAT’s conceptualization of indirect speech acts. These kinds of indirect speech acts might help explain some instances of “implicit” empire criticism in Paul which may have been motivated more by linguistic conventions and a desire for effective communication than out of a fear of retribution. Heilig acknowledges Paul’s “frankness [in] speaking his mind in some situations”⁶⁸ but also suggests that “cryptic … discourse relating to the Roman Empire is not a circumstance to be explained by elaborate theories of coding – but should rather be our default expectation unless there are clear indications of situations that might have triggered a more explicit discussion.”⁶⁹ His work here could benefit greatly by engaging with SAT and indirect speech acts. Heilig’s oversight in this regard is unfortunate considering his engagement with SAT elsewhere.

Indirect speech acts are largely determined by conventions in communication within any given language. Since the illocutionary force of these utterances are not easily identifiable in their locutionary content, much more work needs to be

⁶⁰ Heilig, *Hidden Criticism*, 37–38.

⁶¹ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 53.

⁶² Christoph Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller: A Narratological Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024), 167.

⁶³ Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller*, 150. Heilig draws on Searle by distinguishing between directives, assertives, commissives, expressives, Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller*, 151.

⁶⁴ Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller*, see especially 150–52, 162, 226.

⁶⁵ Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller*, 226.

⁶⁶ Christoph Heilig, *Paulus als Erzähler? Eine narratologische Perspektive auf die Paulusbriefe*, BZNW 237 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 204.

⁶⁷ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*.

⁶⁸ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 52.

⁶⁹ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 53.

done to examine how this sort of speech acts functioned conventionally within the languages and contexts of the early Roman Empire. Considering the vast historical, cultural, and linguistic distances between modern interpreters and the first recipients of NT texts, it is best to proceed cautiously when making claims about how ancient authors and their interlocutors understood subversive speech acts, particularly indirect ones. While it is quite possible to discern complex speech acts within our modern native language(s), we must not mistake the relative ease at which we sometimes perform these interpretive tasks in our native languages with that of interpreting ancient texts which are far removed from our environments. For 21st century interpreters, constructing these ancient speech acts is not hermeneutically impossible, but it is immensely difficult.⁷⁰ In order to mitigate this difficulty, it will be helpful to briefly include a few comments on the function of subversive speech acts in the early Roman Empire. Because of space constraints here, it is not possible to provide a thorough historical survey of the source materials.⁷¹ However, a few brief examples will help to illustrate some of what we know about ancient subversive speech acts before we redirect our attention toward NT empire criticism. I will briefly highlight examples of anti-Roman speech acts that derive from sources outside of the NT. In highlighting these examples, I hope to illuminate, even if in part, the complex process of discerning subversive speech acts in the early Roman Empire.

Subversive speech acts in the early Roman Empire could be performed in various ways. Cremutius Cordus produced writing that Tiberius perceived as insulting Julius Caesar and Augustus because he praised Brutus and Cassius, two of Caesar's assassins.⁷² Similarly, Dio records that Vespasian disliked Priscus for "denouncing royalty and praising democracy."⁷³ These two cases are noteworthy because it demonstrates that inappropriate praise, at times, was probably perceived as undermining Roman *maiestas*.⁷⁴ In other words, during the reign of Tiberius (context C) praising some persons (X) could *count as* criticism (Y) of another, which aroused displeasure or offense (Z). Inquiring with astrologers about the death of the emperor was also considered anti-imperial speech.⁷⁵ Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* is a potent example of the use of par-

⁷⁰ Skinner, "Motives."

⁷¹ For further examples of anti-Roman speech acts, see Mary R. McHugh, "Historiography and Freedom of Speech: The Case of Cremutius Cordus," in *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Ineke Sluiter and Ralph M. Rosen, *Mnemosyne: Bibliotheca Classica Batava* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 406–7.

⁷² Tacitus, *Ann.*, 4:34–6; Suetonius, *Aug.*, 35; Dio 57.24.2–4. For further resources and discussion of Cordus, see Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 97–99.

⁷³ Dio 65.13.1

⁷⁴ More will be said about this in section 2.4 below. Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 98.

⁷⁵ Tacitus, *Ann.*, 12.52. For further description of astrologers, subversive speech, and their exile, see Mary V. Braginton, "Exile under the Roman Emperors," *The Classical Journal* 39.7 (1944): 394, fn. 22.

ody to criticize the apotheosis of Claudius.⁷⁶ Junius Gallio uttered a suggestion to Tiberius that Praetorian guards who completed their service should receive special seating at the games, which Tiberius interpreted as an attempt to shift the loyalty of the guards to the senate rather than to Tiberius and resulted in Gallio's exile.⁷⁷ While Dio does not record Gallio's words verbatim, his description of Gallio's utterance seems to suggest that it did not contain locutionary content that was explicitly identifiable as subversive. Instead, Tiberius counted words that appeared to be a *request* as undermining his authority. Antistius Sosianus was exiled for "composing scurrilous verses upon Nero," but we cannot be sure of its exact content.⁷⁸ This case illuminates the difficulty in examining our source materials in that we are often not afforded exact information on how these subversive speech acts were conducted. We cannot be sure exactly what was said, and so whether these utterances included direct or indirect speech acts is unclear. However, some cases more clearly employ indirect speech acts to subvert. The use of coded language to criticize Rome is evident in some of the sources by employing animal metaphors.⁷⁹ Suetonius includes several references to emperors using beastly imagery, including identifying them as *saevus* and *saevitia*.⁸⁰ Further, although a bit later than our eras, Genesis Rabbah criticizes Rome using the image of Esau.⁸¹

Records of subversive speech within the early Roman Empire often highlight the consequences imposed by imperial administration. After his conviction, Cremutius Cordus's writings were burned, and he starved himself.⁸² As noted above, subversive speech could be punished through imposing exile. In many of these instances, the perlocutionary effect (Z) of these speech acts, namely *offending* emperors, contributes to identifying it as criticism. Although it was possible to conduct empire criticism, even publicly, without punishment. Knowing that the emperor was unlikely to legislate against verbal criticism, Peregrinus thought it safe to criticize the emperor publicly.⁸³ He did so freely and was only later removed by local administrators who found his approach reckless. This recklessness became even more evident when, upon arriving in Greece,

⁷⁶ Seneca, *Apol.*

⁷⁷ Dio 58.18.3–5.

⁷⁸ Tacitus, *Ann.*, 16.14

⁷⁹ Marie Roux, "Animalizing the Romans: The Use of Animal Metaphors by Ancient Authors to Criticize Roman Power or Its Agents," in *Reconsidering Roman Power: Roman, Greek, Jewish and Christian Perceptions and Reactions*, ed. Katell Berthelot, Collection de l'École Française de Rome. (Rome: École française de Rome, 2020), 517–60.

⁸⁰ Suetonius, Tiberius, 57.1, 59.1, 61.1, 61.2, 75.3; Gaius Caligula, 6.2, 11.1, 27.1, 30.2, 32.1, 34.1; Claudius 34.1; Nero 36.1; Galba 12.1; Vitellius 13.1; Vespasian 1.1; Titus 7.1; Domitian 3.2, 10.1, 10.5, 11.1; Roux, "Animalizing the Romans," 519, fn. 6.

⁸¹ Gen. Rab. 63:10, 14; Katell Berthelot, *Jews and Their Roman Rivals: Pagan Rome's Challenge to Israel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 220.

⁸² Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 98.

⁸³ Lucian, *Peregr.*, 18.

Peregrinus incited the people to take up arms against the Romans.⁸⁴ His presence in Greece became increasingly problematic, leading to nearly being stoned to death and threatening to burn himself with fire. Lucian's account is revealing – some speech acts may have been deemed acceptable by emperors but problematic by local city administrators and prefects.

Some cases in the early Roman Empire are more precarious because it is difficult to tell whether they employed anti-Roman speech. Some of Ovid's works may have been banned when he was sent into exile. His exile appears to have been the consequence of a personal blunder, often interpreted as an offense to Augustus,⁸⁵ but also the result of a poem.⁸⁶ It is disputed as to which writing is in view, so identifying it as anti-imperial speech is difficult. If the work in view was one of his love poems, it seems unlikely that Ovid engaged in direct subversive speech. If the problematic poem was his *Ars Amatoria*,⁸⁷ its forthrightness in encouraging love affairs may have been perceived as going against the grain of Augustan marital legislation.⁸⁸ Further, Ovid's descriptions of Augustus's questionable morals in *Tristia* 2, including the circumstances around which he took Livia as his wife, might have functioned as a subtle critique of Augustus.⁸⁹ Other cases of subversive speech are equally difficult to assess. Philosophers were expelled from Rome by Vespasian, but whether their inappropriate doctrines and corruption of their hearers was the result of anti-Roman speech is not fully clear, although Dio notes the perception that philosophers were perceived as *insulting* authority, *overthrowing* order, and *inciting* revolution.⁹⁰ Lucius Afinius was accused of treason after producing “a number of scandalous verses on the sovereign,” but the exact content of this criticism is unclear and it appears to have been a charade that provided opportunity to highlight the emperor's clemency since the intention was to spare him.⁹¹ Further, Tacitus notes that Quintus Haterius and Mamerius Scaurus had both come under suspicion with Tiberius because of things they said,⁹² however, it is hard to tell if their words were understood as empire criticism or mere personal offense. This distinction raises ques-

⁸⁴ Lucian, *Peregr.*, 18.

⁸⁵ Ovid, *Trist.* II, 207–210. See also, G. P. Goold, “The Cause of Ovid's Exile,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 8.1 (1983): 94–107. Blum makes the case that Ovid's works were not banned, Barak Blum, “Banned from the Libraries?: Ovid's Books and Their Fate in the Exile Poetry,” *AJP* 138 (2017): 488–523.

⁸⁶ Ovid, *Trist.* II, 207; *Trist.* III, 47–82.

⁸⁷ Goold, “Ovid's Exile,” 100.

⁸⁸ S. G. Nugent, “Tristia II: Ovid and Augustus,” in *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub and Mark Toher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 240.

⁸⁹ Ovid, *Trist.* II, 160–164; Nugent, “Tristia II,” 250–51.

⁹⁰ Dio 65.13.1

⁹¹ Tacitus, *Ann.*, 14.48

⁹² Tacitus, *Ann.*, 1.13

tions about whether all utterances that caused personal offense (Z) to the emperor should be categorized as empire criticism.

This brief survey of subversive speech acts in the early Roman Empire reveals some of the challenges of discerning empire criticism within the ancient sources. Some writing indicated that empire criticism was carried out indirectly by not clearly indicating its illocutionary force within its locutionary content. In many of these cases, no direct or explicit references have been made to the emperors or imperial ideology. This should not come as a surprise, since other forms of polemical discourse in the early Roman Empire follow similar patterns. Some early Christian polemics against groups or people other than Rome were effectively conducted without naming its interlocutor(s), or without directly invoking their opponent's ideology.⁹³ To be fair, some polemics were certainly far more direct.⁹⁴ However, we must not mistake these cases of direct polemical criticism as the only way to perform subversive speech acts. One need not look far within our own 21st century contexts to see that this is still the case, whether this kind of criticism is accomplished by saying “Let’s go Brandon,” or by intentionally positively proclaiming a viewpoint that is deemed deviant among your own social, political, or religious communities.

Inappropriate praise, unwise suggestions, parody, scandalous love poetry, scurrilous writings, beastly imagery, correlating the Romans with notorious figures (Esau), and provoking astrologers to predict the death of the emperor could all count as empire criticism. Further, empire criticism can sometimes be detected by examining the perlocutionary effect that the utterance had upon imperial administrators. However, there were times when local administrators regarded some utterances as subversive even though they did not trouble the emperor. The line between empire criticism and personal insult is sometimes blurry,

⁹³ These indirect forms of criticism can be seen in some early Christian anti-pagan polemics. Whitmarsh argues that early Christians adapted the concept of *atheos* polemically to refer to those “who did not believe in *their* god,” Tim Whitmarsh, “Away with the Atheists! Christianity and Militant Atheism in the Early Empire,” in *Christianity in the Second Century: Themes and Developments*, ed. James Carleton Paget and Judith M. Lieu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 291. The epistle of Barnabas uses imagery from Dan. 7 to represent the Roman emperor (possibly Nerva), and it also uses Is. 49:17 to cast Rome as enemies, Michele Murray, *Playing a Jewish Game: Gentile Christian Judaizing in the First and Second Centuries CE*, Studies in Christianity and Judaism/Études Sur Le Christianisme et Le Judaïsme 13 (Waterloo, Ont: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004), 45–46.

⁹⁴ The work of early Christian apologists provides a good example of this when they name their interlocutors and their theological perspectives. This can be seen in Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian’s work against Marcion. For a thorough evaluation of these author’s characterization of Marcion, see Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Marcion has over-enthusiastically been read as the target of much of Justin’s work, even when it is not clearly the case, Matthijs den Dulk, *Between Jews and Heretics: Refiguring Justin Martyr’s Dialogue with Trypho*, Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 53.

and it is not always helpful to begin by examining retribution carried out by imperial authorities and then working backwards to find subversive intent. It is important to note that utterances which were deemed harmless by one emperor might not be understood similarly by his successor and could result in older material carrying empire critical weight within a new era.

Barclay and Robinson's notorious critiques of empire criticism in the NT have rightly called into question whether the NT engages in hidden criticism of the empire.⁹⁵ They claim that the emperor (and imperial ideology) are absent in most NT texts, and so empire criticism can be likened to mistakenly seeing the emperor's new clothes⁹⁶ or finding elephants in trees.⁹⁷ This brief survey of subversive speech acts in the early Roman Empire should open interpreters to the possibility of empire criticism in the NT occurring through the use of indirect speech acts and not direct ones. These speech acts are conventional, sometimes leading to more effective communication, and not the result of needing to avoid persecution. More needs to be done to assess the presence of indirect speech acts in the NT, and to draw from wider examples of what we know about subversive speech in the early Roman empire. This task is challenging since many of our sources describe the consequences of these utterances without always identifying its content.

1.4 *Speech Acts and Institutional Facts*

Another area of SAT that is useful for empire criticism is the function of speech acts in relation to institutional facts. In contrast to brute facts, which have an ontology apart from any social construction, institutional facts only exist within a web of social institutions.⁹⁸ Water has a chemical formula that can be measured in terms of its oxygen and hydrogen atoms. While the names we give for each of these atoms involve certain institutional linguistic agreements, the fact of water as H_2O exists apart from any social institution and so constitutes a brute fact. However, an American dollar is socially constructed. While a physical dollar bill has ontological compositional components, its object can only be *counted* as a form of currency because of an institutional agreement to count it as such within a particular social construct.⁹⁹ This distinction between brute facts and

⁹⁵ Barclay, *Pauline Churches*, 363–87; Robinson, “Hidden Transcripts.”

⁹⁶ Barclay, *Pauline Churches*, 383, fn. 69.

⁹⁷ Robinson, “Hidden Transcripts,” 72. For my earlier brief response to Barclay and Robinson, see Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 257–58.

⁹⁸ Searle, *Construction of Social Reality*. “Institution” here is used broadly to refer to social agreements made in particular contexts and need not presume an officially established institution that underlies it (although such underlying institutions certainly exist in many cases related to institutional facts), Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 54, fn. 112.

⁹⁹ The awareness of the socially constructed nature of money is becoming intensified with the development of digital currency such as bitcoin. For a philosophical analysis of bitcoin, see

institutional facts is important here because subversive speech acts occur in relation to institutional, not brute facts. While someone might criticize the existence of a stone, such an act can only count as subversive speech if the stone is attributed a certain institutional value, e.g., the stone *counts as* a memorial statue commemorating an important figure or victory. In this case, the stone object is granted certain status within a particular institutional construct.¹⁰⁰ Status conferral is one important kind of institutional fact that relates to subversive speech acts. Some speech acts can confer status (“I hereby appoint you commissioner”), others can remove status (“you are fired”). Speech acts can also be used to affirm or deny institutional facts that confer status, even when the speaker is not granted any official authority of status conferral or removal. For example, “Let’s go Brandon” can be used to participate in this kind of denial of institutional facts, namely status conferral. If the locution “Let’s go Brandon” (X) is used in the context (C) of Donald Trump’s supporters questioning the validity of the 2020 American presidential election results, the phrase might *count as* a statement of denial (Y), calling into question Joe Biden’s institutional status as elected American president. Such denial may not have the power to overturn the institutional fact. Nevertheless, it can still count as a potent subversive speech act in this context.

Institutional facts are important when conducting speech acts such as disempowerment, discrediting, depriving, delegitimizing, marginalizing, denying, and invalidating. These kinds of subversive speech acts occur by engaging certain institutional facts. To discern these subversive speech acts, there needs to be an awareness of which institutional facts are contextually relevant, and so MCBs must also be examined. Further, subversive speech acts can occur when, in speaking, a certain status which exists within a particular institutional setting is *not afforded to those who are deemed worthy of it*, or when such status is *granted to others who do not possess the appropriate qualifications for such status to be conferred*. For example, a subversive speech act can be performed when a soldier in the US army who possesses the rank of private refuses to grant appropriate status via speech act by intentionally referring to a Colonel by their first name – in disapproval of the Colonel’s rank. That same soldier might also perform a subversive speech act by referring to another soldier who possesses the rank of private as “Colonel.” In both cases, certain institutional facts are undermined or called into question by means of a subversive speech act.

Since empire criticism engages with social constructions of reality, the functions of NT speech acts in relation to imperial institutional facts deserve further attention. Some interpreters have raised concerns about the presence

Andrew M. Bailey, Bradley Rettler, and Craig Warmke, *Resistance Money: A Philosophical Case of Bitcoin*. (New York/London: Routledge, 2024).

¹⁰⁰ On status conferral and removal, see Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 55–56.

of “parallelomania” within NT empire criticism.¹⁰¹ These interpreters detect an overenthusiasm in empire criticism of identifying terminological and conceptual parallels between the NT and the Roman imperial ideology. In some respects, this concern is warranted, especially when empire critical interpreters have detected parallels in locutionary acts without carefully attending to illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. In these cases, the presence of parallel imperial concepts are not enough in themselves to warrant an empire critical interpretation, since non-subversive illocutionary acts can be performed by using these parallel concepts.

It is helpful to navigate between two extremes – the complete dismissal of parallelism in empire criticism vs the overly enthusiastic uncovering of unconvincing parallels within NT texts. Focusing on institutional facts when examining potential imperial parallels is important because the invocation of parallel concepts can occur in the performance of a subversive illocutionary act directed at these institutional facts. Having an awareness of these institutional facts is one important step in discerning the total speech act. At the same time, the mere presence of parallel concepts does not necessarily indicate the performance of a subversive speech act but could simply invoke elements that make up *mutual contextual beliefs*. In other words, it is possible that these kinds of parallels are the result of images extracted from the shared conceptual frameworks within the world of speakers and hearers (MCBs). These parallels can even occur without much thought to its antecedent. However, even when its antecedent is confidently tied (in some way) to imperial ideology, more needs to be done to demonstrate the presence of a subversive speech act. Not enough consideration has been given to instances where such parallelism negotiates imperial ideology in more complex ways such as reinforcing, reinscribing, mirroring, or mimicking rather than subverting it.¹⁰²

Comparisons between imperial honorific titles and language used of Jesus in the NT have been frequently exhausted within empire criticism of the NT and are often met with a high degree of skepticism.¹⁰³ Concerns about whether

¹⁰¹ Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 28; Haddad, *Paul and Empire Criticism*, 29–33. See also, Michael F. Bird, *An Anomalous Jew: Paul among Jews, Greeks, and Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 226.

¹⁰² My own earlier work could have attended to this more carefully in Ephesians (especially Eph 5:21–6:9), Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*. Maier, Bird, and Schüssler Fiorenza do better at detecting these wide range of responses in Ephesians: Harry O. Maier, *Picturing Paul in Empire : Imperial Image, Text and Persuasion in Colossians, Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles*, 2013, see esp. 8–15; Bird, “Ephesians,” 266–68; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Ephesians*, Wisdom Commentary 50 (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2017), lxxx–lxxii. Mirroring and mimicking can be one way of performing a subversive speech act. Here I intend to draw out these when they do not subvert. On Jewish mimesis and mimicry of Roman power, see Berthelot, *Jews and Their Roman Rivals*, 218–27.

¹⁰³ This sort of comparison is captured well in the title of McKnight and Modica’s edited volume: Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, eds., *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not* (Downers

these locutions can effectively be shown to conduct subversive speech acts are warranted. However, more attention could be given to how these concepts engage with imperial institutional facts, especially when these locutions are used to confer honorific status upon someone who would normally be deemed unworthy of it. In this way, a wider reassessment of honorific concepts that are attributed to Jesus in the NT would be helpful when placed in conversation with Roman imperial honorific institutional facts. When might the conferral of such statuses, if attributed to a crucified Messiah under imperial subjugation, *count as* a subversive reorientation of imperial institutional facts for early Christ assemblies?¹⁰⁴ Further, when might the conferral of such statuses on Jesus Messiah also *count as the ideological removal of statuses* of those deemed worthy of these honors within imperial institutional facts (whether it be Roman rule, emperors, administrators, etc.) among early Christ assemblies? When might such engagement with these institutional facts perform speech acts that reinforce, reinscribe, or mirror imperial ideology rather than subvert it? Further, in what ways might these kinds of speech acts show similarities and differences to the inappropriate praises offered by Cremutius Cordus or Priscus? Attending more carefully to these questions can help provide a more balanced approach toward assessing potential parallels with imperial ideology in the NT.

Speech act theory is a philosophy of language that provides one possible tool to help evaluate empire criticism in New Testament texts. In this way speech theory should not be seen as a method that necessarily leads to affirming empire criticism in the New Testament, but rather as a philosophy of language that helps to evaluate such claims. SAT can work as a supplementary tool that, when brought into conversation with other methods, both illuminates and challenges aspects of empire criticism. I have proposed four components of SAT that are particularly useful for empire criticism 1) distinctions between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, 2) the role of context in the performance of speech acts, including *mutual contextual beliefs*, 3) the function of indirect speech acts, and 4) understanding how speech acts can function in relation to institutional facts. The following section will provide a case study for how these SAT features can illuminate empire criticism in the NT. Because each of these SAT components are interlinked in Mark 5, I will weave them into one larger section.

Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2013). For a detailed examination of κύριος language in the NT in comparison to imperial concepts, see Fantin, *Lord*, see also Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 15. Wright also engages in this sort of comparison, N. T. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 160–83.

¹⁰⁴ The attribution of such statuses can be non-subversive, e.g., the Ephesian Artemis was referred to by a wide array of honorific titles which were also associated with Roman imperial concepts, but without such attributions counting as subverting imperial ideology. For a brief catalogue of some of these concepts, see Michael Immendorfer, *Ephesians and Artemis*, WUNT II/436 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 153–57.

2 Speech Act Theory and Empire Criticism: Case Study – Mark 5:1–20

SAT has been used in biblical and theological studies for decades,¹⁰⁵ however, it has largely been overlooked within empire criticism.¹⁰⁶ The following section will help to further illustrate the usefulness of SAT for empire criticism by using Mark 5:1–20 as a case study.¹⁰⁷

2.1 Empire Critical Approaches to Mark 5

Mark's¹⁰⁸ depiction of the Gerasene demoniac (5:1–20) has been interpreted as a response to imperial propaganda and military occupation,¹⁰⁹ particularly as a

¹⁰⁵ Some more recent examples are, James M. Scott, “Cosmopolitanism in Gal 3:28 and the Divine Performative Speech-Act of Paul's Gospel,” *ZNW* 112.2 (2021): 180–200; James M. Scott, “The Speech-Acts of a Royal Pretender: Jesus' Performative Utterances in Mark's Gospel,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 20 (2022): 50–86; Nathan Mastnjak, “Jeremiah's Laments as Effective Speech,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47.4 (2023): 431–54; Michal Beth Dinkler, “The Narrative Rhetoric of Speech and Silence in the Acts of the Apostles,” *NTS* 67 (2021): 1–21; Katherine Davis, “The Metaphor of Sexual and Physical Violence as a Speech Act in Ezekiel 16,” *Journal for the Study of Bible and Violence* 2 (2023): 21–33; Kit Barker, “Did God Really Say ...? Speech Act Theory and Divine Violence,” *Journal for the Study of Bible and Violence* 2 (2023): 4–20; Anthony I. Lipscomb, “Doing Violent Things with Words: Speech Act Criticism, the Self, and the Root יְמִין in the Deuteronomistic History,” *Journal for the Study of Bible and Violence* 2 (2023): 58–83; Nixon, *Evoking Story*. For further sources see Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 298–300.

¹⁰⁶ SAT was one major component of my own eclectic hermeneutic (along with implied/empirical categories, and a narrative hermeneutic) that I applied to my study on empire criticism and *Ephesians*, Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 33–73.

¹⁰⁷ Considering space limitations here, I will focus exclusively on Mark's version of the story without highlighting Matthew's (8:28–34) and Luke's (8:26–39) accounts. A Markan focus works best here for three reasons 1) There have been a wealth of empire critical interpretations of Mark's version, 2) There is no strong consensus on the matter, and some have even suggested that “there is no theme of opposition to Rome in Mark's gospel,” Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2014), 218. 3) While Mark is generally dated after 70 CE, some have proposed an earlier date from the early 40s to mid-60s CE, which provides opportunity to explore different contexts for Mark's audience. For an early date see, Jonathan Bernier, *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament: The Evidence for Early Composition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 69–82; John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 116; D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *Introducing the New Testament: A Short Guide to Its History and Message*, ed. Andrew David Naselli (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 32. Bernier suggests that Mark “pre-dates 45,” (Bernier, *Rethinking*, 69.), and can be precisely dated between 42–45 CE, Bernier, *Rethinking*, 84.

¹⁰⁸ I will employ the standard identification of the author as “Mark” since it is conventional in NT studies, even though the text does not reveal the identity of the author by name. This decision is not an attempt to resolve questions of the authorship of the text.

¹⁰⁹ See especially, Warren Carter, “Cross-Gendered Romans and Mark's Jesus: Legion Enters the Pigs (Mark 5:1–20),” *JBL* 133.1 (2014): 139–55; Albert Hogeterp, “Trauma and Its Ancient Literary Representation: Mark 5,1–20,” *ZNW* 111.1 (2020): 1–32; Stephen D. Moore, “My Name Is Legion, for We Are Many': Representing Empire in Mark,” in *Empire and Apocalypse*:

polemic against Flavian imperial ideology.¹¹⁰ While these interpretations have come under criticism,¹¹¹ there are several aspects of this text that show some

Postcolonialism in the New Testament, ed. Stephen D. Moore, *Bible in the Modern World* 12 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2006), 24–44; Joshua Garroway, “The Invasion of a Mustard Seed: A Reading of Mark 5:1–20,” *JSNT* 32.1 (2009): 57–75; Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*, 20th Anniversary Edition. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 190–97; R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 91–92; J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Contributions to the Study of the Gerasene Demoniac,” *JSNT* 3 (1979): 2–17; Cheryl S. Pero, *Liberation from Empire: Demonic Possession and Exorcism in the Gospel of Mark*, StBibLit 150 (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 146–63; Joel L. Watts, *Mimetic Criticism and the Gospel of Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 134–39; Richard A. Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark’s Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 18, 50, 140–41; Richard Dormandy, “The Expulsion of Legion: A Political Reading of Mark 5:1–20,” *The Expository Times* 111.10 (2000): 335–37; Seong Hee Kim, *Mark, Women, and Empire: A Korean Postcolonial Perspective*, The Bible in the Modern World 20 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 64–65; Stephen D. Moore, “Mark and Empire: ‘Zealot’ and ‘Postcolonial’ Readings,” in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 193–205; Beck, *Cryptograms*, 95–99. Watts detects a polemic in Mk. 5:1–20, but directed against idolatry, Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1997), 159. For a survey of empire critical readings of Mark, see Gabriella Gelardini, *Christus Militans: Studien zur politisch-militärischen Semantik im Markusevangelium vor dem Hintergrund des ersten jüdisch-römischen Krieges*, NovTSup 165 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016), 8–22.

¹¹⁰ Adam Winn, *The Purpose of Mark’s Gospel: An Early Christian Response to Roman Imperial Propaganda*, WUNT II/245 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 184; Adam Winn, “The Gospel of Mark: A Response to Roman Imperial Propaganda,” in *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Adam Winn, RBS 84 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 94–99; Adam Winn, *Reading Mark’s Christology under Caesar: Jesus the Messiah and Roman Imperial Ideology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 81–84; Stephen Simon Kimondo, *The Gospel of Mark and the Roman-Jewish War of 66–70 CE: Jesus’ Story as a Contrast to the Events of the War* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018); Martin Ebner, “Wessen Medium willst du sein? (Die Heilung des Besessenen von Gerasa) Mk 5, 1–20 (EpAp 5,9 ff.),” in *Kompendium der frühchristlichen Wundererzählungen: Band 1: Die Wunder Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013), 266–77; Matthias Klinghardt, “Legionsschweine in Gerasa: Lokalkolorit und historischer Hintergrund von Mk 5, 1–20,” *ZNW* 98 (2007): 42; Nathanael Vette, “The Son of Man and the Sea: Hydromachy and Conquest in Mark’s Sea Voyages,” *JSNT* 47 (2025): 576–99. Some read Mark’s gospel within the period leading up to (or close to) the Jewish war, e.g., Gelardini, *Christus Militans*; Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 64–65; Pero, *Liberation from Empire*, 58.

¹¹¹ Graham H. Twelftree, *In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism Among Early Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 108–11; Strauss, *Mark*, 218; William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 184–85 fn.17; John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina 2 (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002), 166; David E. Garland, *Mark*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 205, fn.10; Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 260; Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 117–21. France dismisses Myers’s empire critical interpretation of the passage because of “the apparent inability of virtually all readers of the story until now to have grasped the point Mark allegedly intended to make,” R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 229, fn.12. Collins disputes an empire critical interpretation of the passage but also notes the possibility of “secondary political implication to the story ... for the audience to link the kingdom of Satan to Rome and the healing activity of Jesus with the restored kingdom of Israel,” Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis:

promise for empire critical analysis. Its use of Roman imperial military imagery, its narrative setting, and its connection with surrounding aquatic scenes that have been read alongside military conquest imagery (the stilling of the storm [4:35–41], and walking on water [6:45–52] scenes) are noteworthy.¹¹² In order to evaluate an imperial critical reading of Mark 5, I will briefly outline important aspects of previous empire critical interpretations of the passage, and then intersect these interpretations with each of the four components of SAT surveyed above. This approach will help to illustrate the wider usefulness of SAT for NT empire criticism.

Mark 5 narrates an account of Jesus and his disciples arriving in a town identified as Gerasa (5:1),¹¹³ in the region of the Decapolis (5:20).¹¹⁴ A man approaches them, possessed by an “unclean spirit” (5:2), having lived in the tombs (5:3). He has been restrained with chains (5:3–4), possesses superhuman strength (5:4), and continually shouts night and day while “bruising himself with stones” (5:5). The man bows and identifies Jesus as “Son of the Most High God” (5:7), asking to not be tormented. Jesus asks the spirit its name, by which it replies “Legion, for we are many” (5:9). After begging to not be sent out of the region (5:10), Jesus fulfills their request by sending the spirits into a herd of 2000 pigs who rush down the slope and are drowned in the sea (5:11–13). Afterward, the pig herders spread the news to people in town, who arrive to see the man in his right mind. Upon seeing the man and the pigs, the people are afraid and beg Jesus to leave the region (5:14–17). The newly healed man asks to go with Jesus

Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 270. Bryan affirms the terminological connections with the Roman military in Mark’s narrative but is hesitant to affirm Horsley and Sugirtharajah’s anti-imperial interpretations, Christopher Bryan, *Render Unto Caesar: Jesus, the Early Church, and the Roman Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 48–50.

¹¹² For connections drawn between military imagery, Mark 5, and Mark’s aquatic scenes in Mark 4–6, see Winn, “Gospel of Mark,” 100–101; Winn, *Mark’s Christology*, 82–85; Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus*, 159; Vette, “The Son of Man.” Myers interprets these two aquatic scenes as “overcom[ing] the institutionalized social divisions between Jews and gentiles,” Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 197. A comprehensive examination of Mark’s scene here is not possible but would benefit from looking at counternarratives. For more on counternarratives, see Christoph Heilig’s essay in this volume.

¹¹³ For an overview of the text critical issue with Γερασηνῶν (5:1), see Collins, *Mark*, 263–64.

¹¹⁴ Commentators frequently identify Decapolis as gentile territory, see e.g., Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, WBC 34A (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 281, 283; Mary Healy, *The Gospel of Mark*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scriptures (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 98; Francis J. Maloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2002), 101; Strauss, *Mark*, 215; Ezra P. Gould, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 91; France, *Mark*, 226; Pero, *Liberation from Empire*, 146, 154–55; Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence*, The Powers 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), 43. Collins warns interpreters not to overemphasize the gentile character of the region, also noting that the ‘unclean spirit’ which possesses the man in the narrative should not be associated with gentile impurity, Collins, *Mark*, 267.

but is denied the request (5:18–19). Jesus sends the man to his home to spread word of what ὁ κύριος has done for him (5:19). The man leaves, proclaiming Jesus in the Decapolis, which causes people to be amazed (5:20).

Several features of Mark’s narrative have drawn the interest of empire critical interpreters. Mark uses language and motifs which have been interpreted in conversation with imperial ideology, most notably the identification of the unclean spirit with λεγιών (5:9, 15), and the casting of the unclean spirits into pigs (5:11–13).¹¹⁵ Many interpreters read these images as an allusion to the “swine bearing *legio X Fretensis*”¹¹⁶ which accompanied Titus and Vespasian into Galilee in 67 CE,¹¹⁷ and which was permanently stationed in Jerusalem after 70 CE.¹¹⁸ Further connections have been made between language that appears in the passage and Roman military imagery.¹¹⁹ There are several locutionary terms in Mark 5:1–20 that have been read in relation to the Roman empire: λεγιών (5:9, 15), χοῦρος (5:11–13, 16), ἀγέλη (5:11, 13), ἐπιτρέπω (5:13), and ὄρμα (5:13). The most frequent connection made with Roman military concepts is in the term λεγιών.¹²⁰ Wengst reflects this in wondering if it is possible to “conceive of any ancient hearer or reader who would *not* think of Roman troops in connection with the name ‘Legion’ – in contrast to modern commentators.”¹²¹ He is right about modern interpreters, who are less convinced than he is of the connection with Rome. Interpreters who reject the Roman parallel usually emphasize that

¹¹⁵ Watts notes that pigs were sometimes associated with Roman deities, Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus*, 159. France notes that the scene’s depiction of the drowning of pigs is unusual since pigs can swim, but he attributes it to “giv[ing] way to memorable storytelling,” France, *Mark*, 231, fn. 17. For further discussion on swimming pigs and this scene’s depiction of drowning, see also Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical & Theological Study* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 293; Vette, “The Son of Man,” 585–86. Since pigs can swim, it is unlikely that this scene intends to depict these “unclean animals [as] rush[ing] suicidally into the sea,” Dormandy, “Expulsion of Legion,” 336.

¹¹⁶ Vette, “The Son of Man,” 589. See also, Markus Lau, “Die Legio X Fretensis und der Besessene von Gerasa Anmerkungen zur Zahlenangabe ‘ungefähr Zweitausend’ (Mk 5,13),” *Bib* 88 (2007): 351–64; Gelardini, *Christus Militans*, 165; Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, 92; Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), 181; Collins, *Mark*, 269; Winn, *Mark’s Christology*, 84; Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide*, Abingdon Essential Guides (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 17; Watts, *Mimetic Criticism and the Gospel of Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, 136–37; Pero, *Liberation from Empire*, 153; Ebner, “Wessen Medium,” 270; Klinghardt, “Legionsschweine,” 37–38. Wink alludes to the legion without specifically identifying it, Wink, *Unmasking*, 45.

¹¹⁷ Vette, “The Son of Man,” 589.

¹¹⁸ Berthelot, *Jews and Their Roman Rivals*, 161.

¹¹⁹ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 191.

¹²⁰ See, e.g., Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Politics of Roman Palestine* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2014), 102. Some have noted militaristic connotations present in the concept, but see its battle imagery as indicating spiritual warfare, Strauss, *Mark*, 218; Collins, *Mark*, 269–70.

¹²¹ Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1987), 66.

the term indicates a numerical component which stresses how many unclean spirits inhabit the man.¹²² These interpretations need not be pitted against each other.¹²³ Dormandy notes that “the fact that they explain their name suggests that quantity might not be the normal inference”¹²⁴ Myers interprets three other terms in parallel with Roman military concepts: he sees ἀγέλη as an allusion to military recruits, ἐπέτρεψεν as a military command, and ὥρμησεν as an allusion to the charging of military troops.¹²⁵ Dormandy suggests that the description of a man defiled by legions is a clear mirroring of the notion that “Israel has also been corrupted and defiled through the presence of Roman force,”¹²⁶ and that the superhuman strength of the man possessed “mirror(s) the political reality of many attempts to chain down Israel’s oppressors.”¹²⁷ The evidence for parallels between these terms and the Roman empire has not convinced many Markan scholars. These kinds of locutionary focused discussions are not atypical within empire criticism. When most of the focus is placed on disputing the antecedents to these locutions, their illocutions and perlocutions largely go under analyzed.

Empire criticism has also been detected in Mark 5 by interpreting the exorcism in relation to two water scenes in Mark: the stilling of the storm (4:35–41) and walking on water (6:45–52). Vette interprets these aquatic scenes through the lens of ancient hydromachy legends which depict gods and humans battling over control of the sea.¹²⁸ He observes a shift in the appropriation of these

¹²² Maloney suggests the term could refer to a numerically large number of demons but also notes that it probably held “pejorative” connotations “in a world where the Roman legions ruled,” Maloney, *Mark*, 103. Some have dismissed the idea that an allusion to Rome is present in the use of the term, suggesting that ‘legion’ quantifies the numerical presence of a multitude of demons, Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 255; Gould, *Mark*, 90; France, *Mark*, 229; Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, 281. This numerical interpretation may have further attestation in *Test. Sol.* 11:5–6, where a demon is asked its name and responds with a description of λεγεῶντα τῶν δαιμόνων (11:5), see also Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 165–66.; Garland, *Mark*, 205, fn. 10. However, Dormandy offers an intriguing interpretation of the illocutionary force in the response offered by the unclean spirits (5:9) by noting, “we are many” [is] better seen as an aggressive threat rather than simple mathematics,” Dormandy, “Expulsion of Legion,” 335. Twelftree notes there is ample evidence for the use of the term without military connotations, Twelftree, *Name of Jesus*, 109. Girard interprets the concept as representing “unity in multiplicity,” René Girard, “Generative Violence and the Extinction of Social Order,” trans. Thomas Wieser, *Salmagundi* 63/64 (1984): 221. Liew overlooks the occurrence of λεγιών in Mark 5 entirely (including in his section on “Roman authorities in Mark”), Tat-siong Benny Liew, “The Gospel of Mark,” in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 105–32.

¹²³ Edwards holds to both a numerical interpretation and that it “resembled the grip of the Roman legion on Palestine,” James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 157.

¹²⁴ Dormandy, “Expulsion of Legion,” 335.

¹²⁵ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 191.

¹²⁶ Dormandy, “Expulsion of Legion,” 336.

¹²⁷ Dormandy, “Expulsion of Legion,” 336.

¹²⁸ Vette, “The Son of Man,” 578.

legends within imperial eras, noting that “as nations were identified with their rivers, lakes, and sea straits, the conquest of these bodies of water and their gods was synecdochic for the conquest of the land as a whole.”¹²⁹ Vette draws from numismatic and archaeological evidence, especially from the Flavian eras, that celebrate conquering river gods. He examines the commemoration of the victory in the Judean war depicted on the arch of Titus via imagery of a river god that “could symbolize the Jordan … or Lake Gennesaret (Galilee) on which Vespasian and Titus had won a pivotal naval battle.”¹³⁰ According to Vette, the Markan scenes follow a progression of Jesus’s conquest of a territory associated with impurities, which included the presence of “unclean spirits living in a graveyard by a herd of swine” in Mark 5.¹³¹ Vette recounts the significance of how the Flavian victory of the region involved the conquering of the sea, seeing this Flavian maritime victory as turned on its head in the Markan accounts in such a way that Mark depicts Jesus “not Vespasian, Titus or any other ruler – [a]s the true conqueror, the Jewish Lord of Land and Sea.”¹³²

2.2 Mark 5, SAT, and Empire Criticism

In the following section, I will draw out each of the four components of SAT to evaluate empire criticism in Mark 5. Since each of these elements are inter-linked, I will weave these components into a larger conversation on Mark 5 and SAT rather than separating them. As a text that recounts events set within a narrative context during the life of Jesus, but presumably for a later audience, Mark’s gospel provides a unique opportunity for understanding the distinctions that must be made between the varied speech act contexts of NT narrative texts. Examining these contexts offers an opportunity to see how the same locutions (X) can perform different illocutionary (Y) and perlocutionary (Z) acts in different contexts (C). These varied contexts also impact the possible *mutual contextual beliefs* presumed by the hearers of these utterances within their settings. Each of these elements impacts how one assesses empire criticism in Mark 5.

In the very least, the speech acts in Mark 5 could be understood from two different utterance frameworks: 1) How does Mark portray these speech acts as understood by characters within the narrative itself, set in the Decapolis during the first half of the first century CE? The locutions, illocutions, and perlocutions which are performed between the characters within the scene can be examined within this narrative setting. I will refer to this context as C₁. An assessment of

¹²⁹ Vette, “The Son of Man,” 580–81.

¹³⁰ Vette, “The Son of Man,” 581.

¹³¹ Vette, “The Son of Man,” 584.

¹³² Vette, “The Son of Man,” 595. Similarly, Winn detects a reversal of conquest in the passage, highlighting Jesus as conqueror over Vespasian, Winn, *Mark’s Christology*, 84–85; Winn, “Gospel of Mark,” 100–101, 104–5.

the speech acts within the scene from this vantage point could be useful for interpreters. However, I will focus attention elsewhere to show the consequences that framework 2 has for empire criticism in Mark 5. 2) How might Mark's audience have understood the speech acts in the narrative within their setting(s)? While the historical location and setting of the audience is disputed, how one assesses this context will largely determine how one interprets Mark's intentions in using the speech acts recorded in the scene. I will refer to the various proposals for the context of Mark's audience as C_2 , C_3 , etc. It is possible that Mark used the locutionary acts (X) performed in the narrative in C_1 to conduct different illocutionary (Y) and perlocutionary (Z) acts upon his audience in their context(s). While this distinction has largely gone unnoticed, some of the disputes about empire criticism in NT narrative texts are the result of interpreters (often unknowingly) focusing on different contextual settings of the text's utterances.

Even if we assume that Mark accurately records this account of Jesus's exorcism in the Decapolis, we cannot rule out the possibility that Mark uses the story for his own purposes. Focusing exclusively on how the characters within the scene seem to understand the speech acts in the narrative (C_1) obscures Mark's ability to exhibit ingenuity in contextualizing this scene for his audience (C_2 , C_3 , etc.). It is not difficult to imagine this scenario. E.g., someone could narrate a story of a person telling (X) a crude joke (Y) and producing laughter (Z_1) in the joker's hearers, located in C_x . However, if the narrator disapproves of the joke, the narrating of the story (X) might function as criticism of the joker (Y) for the narrator's hearers in C_y . Therefore, it could be said that in recounting the story (X), the narrator hopes for a different perlocutionary effect (Z_2) on her/his audience located in C_y than the joker intended upon the original hearers of the joke in C_x . In this case, the joker's locutions (X) are recounted to affect a distinctly different perlocutionary act (Z_2) in a different context (C_y) from which the utterance originally occurred (C_x).

Not enough attention has been given to how the locutions (X) narrated in Mark 5 can perform different illocutions (Y_1 , Y_2) and perlocutions (Z_1 , Z_2) in different utterance contexts (C_1 , C_2 , etc.). This reality becomes more evident when attending to the speech acts in the passage from the vantage point of two different date frameworks. For the sake of simplicity, I will use an early pre-70 CE date, with a largely gentile audience located in Rome¹³³ as C_2 ,¹³⁴ and a post-70 CE Flavian context, with a largely Jewish audience located in Syria or Palestine for C_3 .¹³⁵ If

¹³³ That Mark was written to recipients located in Rome has been widely suggested, see especially, Brian J. Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans: The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark's Gospel*, BibInt 65 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003). The same could be said about Mark's gentile audience, see e.g., Stein, *Mark*, 10.

¹³⁴ See fn. 107 above.

¹³⁵ See fn. 110 above. Vette's argument makes most sense if the audience is in Syria or Palestine. See also especially, Klinghardt, "Legionsschweine," 42.

any of the date, location, and identity factors undergo modification, it can have significant consequences for how the audience within those settings might have interpreted Mark's speech acts.¹³⁶

When we turn our attention to C_2 and C_3 for Mark 5, the speech acts in the scene likely carry different resonances. It is important to note the presence of a narrator in this scene for Mark's recipients. This narrator relays locutionary details that are assumed to be seen or understood by characters within the narrative. This leaves Mark's recipients with several locutions which are presumed as non-locutions for characters within the scene. Whereas it is presumed that the people in the scene see the swine rush off the cliff, Mark narrates this to his audience by using the words $\kappa\alpha\lambda\omega\mu\eta\sigma\epsilon\nu\eta\alpha\gamma\epsilon\lambda\eta\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\tau\omega\kappa\eta\mu\eta\omega\eta\epsilon\iota\zeta\tau\eta\eta\theta\alpha\lambda\alpha\sigma\sigma\alpha\eta$ (5:13). An empire critical interpretation, that the herds and their rushing into the sea should be understood in light of Roman military imagery,¹³⁷ and especially tied to allusions to the Judean war,¹³⁸ are far more plausible in C_3 than in C_2 . In C_3 , it is possible that Mark's linguistic cues trigger imperial parallels for his audience in ways that are not presumed to be understood by the characters in the scene itself (C_1), nor obvious to an audience located earlier in C_2 . If so, Mark's speech acts might function as an indirect subversive speech act, *declaring* (Y) Jesus's symbolic reclaiming of the land for Israel as its Messiah,¹³⁹ offering *comfort/hope* (Z) for his post-70 CE Jewish audience. Neither of these speech acts (i.e., its illocution and perlocution) are identical to the illocutions and perlocutions performed by the characters in the scene itself (C_1). E.g., Jesus's words (X) to the demoniac, $\xi\xi\epsilon\lambda\theta\epsilon\ldots\epsilon\kappa\tau\omega\alpha\eta\theta\omega\pi\omega\eta$ (5:8), are depicted as understood by the unclean spirits in the narrative as a *command* (Y) which ultimately results in their *departure* (Z) from the man (5:13). Here, there is possibly a distinction between the speech acts performed by characters in the scene, and Mark's use of them for his audience.

One reason why changing the audience context impacts how the speech acts in this scene would have been understood is because the corresponding *mutual contextual beliefs* that are necessarily to secure uptake of these subversive speech acts do not exist in both contexts. The notion that interpreters may be grasping at straws in making connections between the locutions in Mark 5 and echoes of Flavian Roman military imagery makes more sense for an audience in C_2 because they would not have the appropriate MCBs necessary for the empire critical interpretations highlighted above to secure uptake. However, while the *legio X Fretensis*¹⁴⁰ and the Judean war would have been historically anachronistic

¹³⁶ This whole exercise might arrive at different conclusions if it were conducted under the presumption that Mark was written primarily to another literary author, cf. Walsh, *Origins*.

¹³⁷ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 191.

¹³⁸ Vette, "The Son of Man."

¹³⁹ Vette, "The Son of Man."

¹⁴⁰ Mark's connection with Gerasa and the *legio X* "could well be based on a historical

MCBs for Mark's audience in C₂, these resonances are far more likely for Mark's audience in C₃ and may even have been obvious in that later context. This fact does not guarantee that these MCBs are in view, it merely demonstrates that they are historically plausible.

How one assesses the location of the recipients also contributes to what MCBs would have been plausible within each environment. The widely held notion that Mark was written to a largely gentile audience in Rome might make it less plausible that echoes of the Judean war and the *legio X* would constitute plausible MCBs for these recipients. However, the fact that the Flavian rulers consistently drew upon their conquest of Judea to legitimize their rule¹⁴¹ suggests that some post-70 CE Romans *might* have had the appropriate MCBs to make these resonances with that audience possible, especially since some Judeans were forcibly exported to Rome after the war and could have been present in these communities (or relay its content to others). However, if Mark's Roman recipients are presumed to reside in an earlier era, such MCBs are not plausible, irrespective of whether that audience is largely presumed to be Jews or gentiles.

Vette's claim that Mark invokes ancient hydromachy legends which had been appropriated by Vespasian, deserves further consideration. How reasonable is it to assume that these stories could make up MCBs for Mark's audience? If these ancient sea narratives seem unusual for us as modern interpreters, we must be careful not to assume that this was the case for Mark's audience. However, the literary context of Mark 5, surrounded by maritime scenes, might have resonated differently with Mark's audience in their respective environments. Ebner's claim that *legio X Fretensis* used a wide range of maritime symbols, that even 100 years after Augustus used them in naval battle, they presented themselves as victorious boars on water and land,¹⁴² registers differently for an audience in C₃ compared to C₂. Vette's work on ancient hydromachy legends convincingly demonstrates that these concepts were 'in the air' prior to 70 CE. However, evidence for Flavian appropriation of these stories makes the claim that Mark 5 intends to highlight Jesus as the Jewish Messiah who conquers the sea and the land by expelling Roman legions from the Decapolis far more intriguing if Mark's audience is Jewish and in Syria or Palestine post-70 CE. If Mark's audience is located earlier, such hydromachy narratives may connect only loosely, and without any of the ties to Vespasian. If Vette is right, Mark's retelling of this story appears to function as a *declaration* of Jesus's messianic conquest of the land, which for his

reminiscence" ["könnte durchaus auf einer historischen Reminiszenz beruhen"], Klinghardt, "Legionsschweine," 42.

¹⁴¹ Caroline Barron, "The (Lost) Arch of Titus: The Visibility and Prominence of Victory in Flavian Rome," in *Reconsidering Roman Power: Roman, Greek, Jewish and Christian Perceptions and Reactions*, ed. Katell Berthelot, Collection de l'École Française de Rome. (Rome: École française de Rome, 2020), 285.

¹⁴² Ebner, "Wessen Medium," 270–71.

post-70 CE Jewish interlocutors, would have *counted as* undermining an imperial institutional fact, namely, Flavian conquest ideology.¹⁴³ Horsley appears to agree, “Mark’s story also presents Jesus as leading a renewal of Israel under the rule of God and against Jerusalem and Roman imperial rule.”¹⁴⁴ This interpretation need not suggest that Jesus’s casting out of the unclean spirits is merely a myth, however, it does differentiate between the speech acts contained within the narrative (C_1), and Mark’s use of them for his audience (C_2 or C_3).

The different resonances that this passage may have within the two proposed contexts are largely tied to different potential MCBs held between the author and the audience within these respective environments. Much of what makes empire criticism of Mark 5 appealing within C_3 becomes highly unlikely, if not impossible, in C_2 . Each of the resonances with the *legio X* and with the Flavian context surrounding the Judean war, which are plausible in C_3 , do not work in C_2 . There may well be ways to salvage an empire critical reading for an audience located in C_2 , but not with *these MCBs* which are so dependent on the context surrounding the Judean war. Most notably, the intriguing connection between the *legio X*, its boar insignia, and Mark’s use of $\lambda\epsilon\gamma\iota\omega\eta$ and $\chi\omega\tau\omega\sigma$ works for an audience located in C_3 because they constitute plausible MCBs in that environment. The connection between the *legio X* and the swine in Mark 5 might be further substantiated for this audience in light of source records of the vexillation of 2000 troops, the same number of pigs occurring in Mark 5.¹⁴⁵ While the reference to legion in Mark 5 could still have Roman military resonances irrespective of the audience context, the way within which it is tied into the post-Flavian context makes these particular resonances most plausible within a C_3 environment. This leads me to conclude that empire criticism of Mark 5, especially when tied to allusions to the *legio X* and the Judean war, are obviously far more plausible within C_3 than in C_2 . While a Roman location for the recipients could still maintain some of those resonances post-70 CE, they require an audience with significant knowledge of those events to make such subversive speech acts avoid misfiring and securing uptake. This does not suggest that it is impossible that Mark 5 retained some empire critical flair within other environments, but these specific interpretations which are related to the Judean war would be historically impossible in an earlier context. For this reason, I find many of the existing empire critical readings of Mark 5 to be most plausible for an audience located in C_3 , but far less plausible if Mark was written to an earlier audience.

If Mark 5 performs empire criticism, it engages in indirect subversive speech acts by depicting Jesus as restoring the land and sea and inaugurating the

¹⁴³ Vette, “The Son of Man,” 595.

¹⁴⁴ Horsley, *Politics of Roman Palestine*, 70.

¹⁴⁵ Lau, “*Legio X Fretensis*; Ebner, “*Wessen Medium*,” 272; Klinghardt, “*Legionsschweine*,” 41–42.

kingdom of Israel's God. Within a post-70 CE Flavian context (C_3), these ideas may well have constituted status removal of an imperial institutional fact for Mark's audience. This interpretation does not require that Mark's whole gospel vision be tied to empire criticism. Instead, it is possible that in Mark 5, the author performs indirect subversive speech acts to highlight the work of Jesus Messiah, further illuminating Mark's christological goals. In doing so, Mark effectively communicates the messianic identity of Jesus for a post-70 CE Jewish audience.

My work on Mark 5, SAT, and empire criticism should cast doubt on the plausibility of such reading if Mark is envisioned in an earlier context. Again, this does not suggest that empire criticism is certain within a later context, but it increases its likelihood so long as the necessary contextual components are in place for these subversive speech acts to secure uptake. This approach not only illustrates how SAT can be useful for affirming empire critical interpretations of NT texts but also helps to correct over-enthusiastic detections of empire criticism when critical speech act components may not be present.

3 Conclusion

The growing field of empire studies in the NT needs to continue to be conducted with greater methodological rigor. My hope is that this essay, along with the others in this volume, will continue to further the field by offering an array of approaches that can help pave new ways forward in the coming years. I have highlighted four areas of speech act theory that are useful for evaluating empire criticism in the NT: 1) Attending to *locutions, illocutions, and perlocutions* can help to distinguish between the sense and reference of the words used in an utterance (locutions), and what one hopes to accomplish by using these words (illocutionary acts). Illocutionary acts can fit a wide range of subversive speech acts. I offered an expanded catalogue of kinds of illocutionary acts that can constitute subversive speech, and called for empire criticism of the NT to more carefully examine these types. I also briefly explored the role of perlocutionary acts in subversive speech by noting that a wide range of hoped-for responses can accompany illocutionary acts that perform empire criticism, while also cautioning against focusing too narrowly on speech acts which result in offending imperial authorities. 2) My work on context and speech acts revealed that examining *contextual components* are essential to discerning subversive speech. Since locutions (X) can count as a wide range of illocutions (Y) and perlocutions (Z) in differing contexts (C_1, C_2, C_3 , etc.), empire criticism requires a more careful examination of the contexts of authors and audiences. This sort of examination also requires analyzing *mutual contextual beliefs*. Since empire critical interpreters have often overgeneralized these MCBs, more careful work needs to be done to show what MCBs must have been in place for empire critical

interpretations to work. 3) Empire critical *indirect speech acts* do not explicitly invoke Roman emperors or imperial ideology. These kinds of speech acts are often more effective forms of communication and not motivated out of a fear of persecution. A brief survey of subversive speech in the early Roman Empire revealed that indirect speech acts are also conventional. A wide range of kinds of speech could be considered subversive, many of which were not obviously critical in its locutionary content. 4) I briefly outlined the difference between *institutional facts* and brute facts. These categories help to assess how subversive speech engages with institutional facts, especially ones related to imperial ideology. Since ideological elements related to Roman imperial order, rule, and power are constructed as institutional facts, I proposed that more could be done in empire criticism to analyze the ways that NT speech acts that highlight the honorific identity of Jesus might engage with these institutional facts. More work could also be done to discern how the conferral and removal of status within institutional facts might constitute reinforcing or subverting imperial ideology.

The final section of this essay examined Mark 5 and empire criticism by bringing these into conversation with speech act theory. I highlighted empire critical interpretations of Mark 5, many of which read the scene through the lenses of a post-70 CE date, after the Judean war, in which the *legio X Fretensis* played a role in Judea and the Decapolis. Several concepts in Mark 5 are often interpreted through the lens of imperial ideology, including λεγιών (5:9, 15), χοῖρος (5:11–13, 16), ἀγέλη (5:11, 13), ἐπιτρέπω (5:13), and ὄρμάω (5:13). The surrounding literary context of Mark 5, including two aquatic scenes (the stilling of the storm [4:35–41], and walking on water [6:45–52]), has led to empire critical interpretations that connect Jesus's actions with ancient hydromachy scenes that were eventually appropriated by Vespasian during the Judean war. Jesus is then interpreted as the Jewish Messiah who conquers sea and land and expels unclean spirits of legions in establishing the rule of Israel's God. I brought these interpretations into engagement with SAT by focusing on a context framework situated within two possible historical settings: 1) early date, pre-70 CE, largely gentile audience in Rome, 2) post-70 CE, largely Jewish audience in Syria or Palestine. By examining Mark's speech acts through these two contextual lenses, I demonstrated that they resonate differently within these differing contexts. Mutual contextual beliefs, which are plausibly connected to the *legio X* and Flavian participation in the Judea war post-70 CE are absent in earlier eras. This makes empire criticism in Mark 5 more plausible for a later date than an earlier one. Within a later setting, Mark 5 is more likely to have been perceived as conducting indirect subversive speech acts, declaring Jesus Messiah as symbolically victorious over Roman legions, offering comfort/hope for his audience. In doing so, Mark challenges Roman institutional facts associated with the Flavian conquest of Judea. I conclude by noting that such an interpretation is far more plausible if Mark is dated later, but far less plausible in an earlier context. This exercise points to how each

of the four components of speech act theory can illuminate the function of subversive speech acts in texts. Further, these four components of SAT have a great deal to offer to the field of empire criticism in that they are useful for detecting both the *presence* of potentially subversive speech acts in the NT, as well as the *absence* of subversive speech acts in these texts.

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Semiotics

An Avenue for Discerning Anti-Imperial Language

Laura J. Hunt

We are driving down the road. Sitting in the passenger seat, I notice a dog trot out from behind one of the houses; it is heading towards the road, and I gasp. The driver hears my gasp, notices the dog and slows down, watching carefully. The dog turns into the next yard, and we go on without further incident. Even without words, this communicative exchange exhibits all the aspects of Umberto Eco's semiotics: the semiotic triad; cultural units; and encyclopedias and universes of discourse.

This chapter starts with an explanation of these terms and of Eco's description of the process of communication. With the theory in place, the larger middle section will look at the ways semiotics, *Haftpunkte* and universes of discourse specifically, can help interpreters verify a particular cultural encyclopedia as the source of anti-imperial cultural units. The chapter closes with three limitations and a summary.

1 Introduction to Semiotics

Before defining the terms Umberto Eco uses, his semiotic approach must be distinguished from the semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure.¹ Then Eco's terminology (the semiotic triad, cultural units and abduction, encyclopedias and universes of discourse, and open and closed texts) will be explained. This first section of the chapter lays the conceptual and linguistic groundwork for the analyses that will follow in part two.

Saussure looked at the signifier and the signified, noting especially the arbitrariness of the signifier: There is no logical reason why the sound combination d-o-g ought to be connected to the idea of the animal it represents, as shown by the equally arbitrary use of c-h-i-e-n to represent the same animal in a different system.² Furthermore, Saussure distinguished between “langue” and “parole,”

¹ For much of the material in this section, see Laura J. Hunt, *Jesus Caesar: A Roman Reading of the Johanne Trial Narrative*, WUNT II/506 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 6–13, 52–66.

² I am bracketing out etymological reasons which may explain historically how certain signifiers came to be connected to certain signifieds, but not logically how any signified would require one certain signifier.

where the former refers to the whole system of language and the latter to the use of language in a specific speech event.

Umberto Eco, however, relying on the system of signs developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, noted the embeddedness of signs in cultures. His approach is triadic rather than dyadic and emphasizes the primacy of the sign. There is, in fact, a tendency to assume that we learn language by pointing at things and being told their names: "That's a cat." We imagine that the encounter with the thing happens first, and then we name it.

Peirce, however, noticed that humans are not able to name the sensory experiences that bombard our brains without the organizing structures of a language. A Chihuahua and a Siamese might not be "dog" and "cat" unless the language our caregivers taught us first distinguished them into separate categories.³ The primacy of the sign is one of the main contributions of Eco's semiotics to the discussion of communication. But the sign is only one part of the semiotic triad which also includes an object and an interpretant.

1.1 The Semiotic Triad

So far, we have established that Eco's semiotics is triadic with the primacy of the sign as the organizing factor of experience. Within the car scene described at the beginning of the chapter, my senses have been impacted by the car, the road, the dog, and the lack of a fence. I have organized this information according to the stories I know about the danger of dogs running into roads with oncoming traffic. On the ground of this interpreted situation (the immediate object), I compose a sign, a noise in this case: <gasp!>.⁴

The driver is also confronted by the various elements of the road: the dashboard, any oncoming traffic, the condition of the pavement, and the line of houses by the side of the road. Hearing the gasp, the driver will attempt to interpret that sound in relation to the objects in view. Noticing the dog, an interpretant arises: "she gasped because she was worried the dog would run in front of our car."⁵

³ The strong form of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis proposed that people are unable to think things that their language cannot express. However, the more commonly accepted weak form of the hypothesis has shown that, while language organizes experience, humans are nevertheless able to adapt their language to fit their cognitive needs; Umberto Eco, "Between Author and Text," in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 67.

⁴ For a figure that shows the relationship described here, see Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 183. This chapter will not distinguish immediate and dynamic objects (nor immediate, final and dynamic interpretants), but these concepts helpfully detach interpretation and communication from the idea of any objective apprehension of the world. See explanations and examples in Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 8–12, 235–40.

⁵ Interpretants are more general than the meaning one interpreter creates in one individual

The role of the object in this communicative event will be discussed in the third section of this chapter. At this point it is important to note two aspects of communication in a semiotic approach. The first is, again, the primacy of the sign. Remembered stories, language about driving, about dogs and danger, narrative tropes and themes, all of this linguistic knowledge allowed both driver and passenger to understand the world of sights and sounds that confronted them. The second point is that all three elements of a semiotic triad are held in tension. A gasp uttered at the top of a roller coaster would organize and communicate an experience of a completely different kind, with a different interpretant. And a gasp by itself, in the absence of the object (an experiential context) would have no meaning at all.

Now that the semiotic triad has been explained as the tensive connection between language, experience, and meaning (sign, object, and interpretant), we can move on to signs themselves and the ways they trigger clusters of culturally-organized concepts. Because each sign can trigger multiple clusters (cultural units), texts must be interpreted through a process Eco has called abduction.

1.2 Cultural Units and Abduction

Signs have no meaning without context. This fact is best illustrated by a letter that comes in the mail with no return address. Inside is a sheet of paper with just four words: Long live the king!⁶ Each word is in English; each has a clear set of meanings in the dictionary. Not only are the words commonly understood, but the phrase itself is a common one and does not need special skill or knowledge to understand it. However, without context, it has no interpretant.

The lack of context (either sensory or written, or both) frustrates the process of abduction, the term Eco used to describe the series of guesses interpreters make as they move through a text, guesses that confirm or disprove their developing interpretant. If one received the note along with an ad for a newly remastered set of Elvis songs, one would know that it referred to the longevity of the influence of the man sometimes called “the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll.”⁷ Similarly, in the midst of a

mind. They are communal in nature, and, in this example, it is likely that any driver from the same culture in the same set of circumstances would receive the same interpretant. Thus, the interpretant is not something the individual *creates*; it is rather a flash of insight mediated to the individual through the acquisition of a communal language and, as we will see, a cultural encyclopedia. See Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976), 68.

⁶ This illustration is adapted from Jerrold J. Katz, *Propositional Structure and Illocutionary Force: A Study of the Contribution of Sentence Meaning to Speech Acts* (New York: Crowell, 1977), 14; Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 78.

⁷ For the racist marketing decisions behind Presley’s rise to fame, see Paul G. Barretta, “Tracing the Color Line in the American Music Market and Its Effect on Contemporary Music Marketing,” *Arts and the Market* 7.2 (2017): 216.

fairy tale, one might read: “The newly crowned prince came out on the balcony and for the first time in his life heard shouts of ‘Long live the king!’” The text, composed of more signs all with their own multiple cultural units, nevertheless guides the reader, confirming some guesses and disconfirming others, leading her towards meaning. On the one hand, Eco argued that one does not absorb the context and then deduce the meaning of the phrase, because the context has no meaning on its own either. On the other hand, one does not assemble all the meanings of individual words into a jigsaw puzzle that only has meaning once it is complete. Rather, the process of abduction works as a series of guesses that are either reinforced (“blown up”) or erased (“narcotized”) as the communicative event unfolds.⁸

But the guesses involve more than just assembling the possible meanings of each word as they are listed in a dictionary. Instead, signs point towards context clusters in which they are regularly used.⁹ Coming across the word “king,” one might posit the British monarchy and lions, as well as Elvis and fairy tales as possible “cultural units” from which to abduct to meaning. Cultural units can be defined as “pegs on which the members of a community hang all information that can be inferred from the interpretation of an expression against the backdrop of a shared encyclopedia.”¹⁰ If the driver has not seen the dog, my gasp in the car might have caused them to guess that it referred to a child too near the road, another available cultural unit for expressions of apprehension while driving. In this case it would be a further object, the sight of the dog approaching, that would cause them to settle on “watch out for the dog!” as an interpretant of the communication.

The *cultural* aspect of cultural units will be important in the discussion below. In the ancient world, the multilingualism of the Mediterranean and the complex relationships between cultures under Imperial Rome means that we are not only comparing cultural units in the present to cultural units of the past. Instead, cultural units belonging to several different ancient encyclopedias may be mobilized in the same text, challenging readers to determine appropriate interpretants. These determinations must be made in the process of abduction just discussed, which occurs as the text creates its universe of discourse, its linguistic world. We turn, then, to a discussion of encyclopedias and universes of discourse.

⁸ Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 53–55.

⁹ Eco’s definition of a sign is “*everything* that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else*”; *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, trans. Alastair McEwen (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999), 137.

¹⁰ Paolo Desogus, “The Encyclopedia in Umberto Eco’s Semiotics,” *Semiotica* 2012.192 (2012): 511–13.

1.3 Encyclopedias and Universes of Discourse

Umberto Eco used the term “encyclopedia” to describe all the cultural units available for mobilization in a text. And while one might imagine a universal encyclopedia containing all the possible cultural units for all the signs ever imagined, it is helpful to separate them into volumes that each contain a different culture’s linguistic habits. While Eco’s encyclopedias are focused on patterns of language (especially signs and cultural units), these divisions overlap with discussions about lexical meanings. The meaning of λόγος in John 1, for example, has been found in Greek philosophy, in the LXX, in Philo, and in Aramaic Targums.¹¹ But in Eco’s terms, debates between these choices are about choosing the encyclopedia that the universe of the text guides one towards.

The universe of the text is the world the text is creating within itself.¹² When John’s Jesus sits by a well in Samaria and asks a woman for a drink (John 4:7), the text creates a world in which the protagonist, Jesus, converses with women, against the expectations of the characters (4:9, 27) and perhaps also against the expectations of those in the ancient world who heard the narrative read. In either case, the text crafts a universe within which a Jewish man speaks to a Samaritan woman apparently without loss of honor for either one.

Thus, finding the interpretant for a sign is not as simple as looking it up in the correct encyclopedia and then plugging it into the text. Authors creatively craft meaning out of the signs and cultural units available to them, and they may edit habitual interpretants as they create the text’s universe of discourse. Like a universal Wikipedia, cultural units in encyclopedias are constantly subject to rewriting. The cultural units for “one small step” were forever changed by the moon landing in 1969, and while “the circle of life” used to have a cultural unit that mainly connected to birth, death, and decay cycles learned in middle school, since 1994 the phrase may first call to mind an image of a cartoon mandrill standing on a tall rock holding up a lion cub.¹³

When my children were young, they had the following conversation: “Where’s the teeter totter?” “Don’t you remember? We left it on the fence when we were using it as a Napoleon hat.” They were able to use these words together meaningfully because, at ten years old, they had discovered that the small, light plastic teeter totter we had bought for them as toddlers had a hollow space underneath that fit on their heads. And, at some earlier time, one of them must have encountered the semiotic object of their brother wearing a red plastic teeter totter on his head, and it prompted an image of Napoleon’s famous bicorne hat. The sign they must have uttered as a result (“Is that your Napoleon hat?”) became the

¹¹ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 37.

¹² Eco, *Semiotics*, 85–86.

¹³ Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, *The Lion King* (Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Pictures, 1994).

text that edited the cultural units of “teeter totter” and “Napoleon’s hat,” creating a new unit which associated the two together. Because this event has been discussed in our family for years, our familial encyclopedia includes a cultural unit in which red plastic teeter totters can be used to pretend to be Napoleon, and this cultural unit is available to all of us in creating interpretants in texts whose universes of discourse guide us into that abduction. “In 1815, Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo” does not open that cultural unit. “Remember? We left it on the fence when we were using it as a Napoleon hat” does.

Signs are arranged into encyclopedias of cultural units, and texts use encyclopedias, adopting and adapting them to create their universes of discourse. Readers use their own cultural encyclopedias to abduct to the interpretant of the text. In the process, encyclopedias and cultural units may be reinforced or rewritten. And since authors have no control over what encyclopedias readers may bring to the texts they have created, they may anticipate these encounters in two different ways: by creating open or closed texts, our next topic.

1.4 Open and Closed Texts

A discussion of open and closed texts is made more difficult by the very process just described in the previous subsection, that of rewritten cultural units. Open and closed texts are sometimes defined as those that anyone can understand (open) and those that only make sense to a select few (closed).¹⁴ The problem with this definition, however, is that it is impractical because it depends on the knowledge of the readers. The textbooks I assign to college students explain vocabulary and foreign concepts necessary to interpret the rest of the text, making them open to them. But they would be closed to first graders.

The difficulty of deciding which concepts require explanations persists in any meaning of open and closed texts, but the important factor for Eco was how much work a text did to inform its readers. An open text reaches out to the broadest range of readers imaginable, takes the readers by the hand and invites them into the universe of discourse of the text slowly, explaining everything along the way.¹⁵ A closed text ignores any reader not already familiar with its universe of discourse; it turns its back on outgroup members and continues speaking without caring whether they understand.

Open and closed texts exist along a continuum of course, but this explanation suggests that the main criterion to determine where a text falls along the scale is the amount of work it does explaining itself. My gasp in the passenger seat is a closed text because it simply assumed that my driver would do the work to figure

¹⁴ For some other misunderstandings surrounding these concepts, see Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 41–42.

¹⁵ Although using slightly different terminology, Peter M. Phillips argues for the openness of John’s Prologue; *The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 167–70; 201–3.

out what I meant. If I had yelled, “Watch out for the dog coming out from behind the house!” there would be less opportunity for misunderstanding because that open text explained itself. Almost counterintuitively, then, open texts cut off unplanned meanings by anticipating a variety of readers. Closed texts, on the other hand, allow indiscriminate meanings by readers unaccustomed to the author or the topic. A driver who did not recognize the nuances of my wordless expressions might have looked at the fall leaves in the front yards and responded, “Yes, they’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

At the extreme end of the closed text spectrum, anti-language communicates (often in situations of oppression) in a way that outsiders cannot understand correctly, and its texts work to prevent a broader readership. Every generation of teenagers that develops new meanings for old words crafts a language designed to communicate only to ingroup members. Outgroup overhearers might think they understand, but they are unlikely to interpret according to the author’s intent.

In the previous section, an example was given in which one child asked where the teeter totter was and the other answered, “Don’t you remember? We left it on the fence when we were using it as a Napoleon hat.” Although not created in social adversity, only the small ingroup of seven neighborhood kids might correctly understand this closed text, leaving the rest of us puzzled, without any connections between teeter totters, fences, and the French Revolution.¹⁶ This closed text offers signs whose usual cultural units are known to most English speakers, but without the help of the broader familial encyclopedia, no interpretant arises. Although some New Testament interpreters have suggested that oppressed early Christians authors wrote using an anti-language, readers today, as part of their outgroup, would not be able to understand their writings if that were the case.¹⁷

Most texts, furthermore, provide the information necessary for intended readers to arrive at a reasonable interpretant.¹⁸ Their universes of discourse guide the abductive process to the necessary cultural encyclopedia. Cultural units from that encyclopedia are used and perhaps edited to understand the signs of the text, which itself is the response of the author/s to real-world semiotic objects. Now that this theoretical structure has been established, we can begin to apply it to the project of noticing anti-imperial language in ancient texts.

¹⁶ This reference to the ingroup links semiotic readings with Social Identity approaches; see Christopher A. Porter’s chapter on Social Identity Theory in this volume, as well as Laura J. Hunt, “Triangulating the Johannine Community in John 18:28–19:22,” in *The Johannine Community in Contemporary Debate*, ed. Christopher Seglenieks and Christopher W. Skinner (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2024), 98–99.

¹⁷ Phillips, *Prologue*, 59–65, 71; Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 20–21.

¹⁸ For a description of criteria for an “ethically grounded interpretation,” see Stefan Alkier, “Intertextuality and the Semiotics of Biblical Texts,” in *Reading the Bible Intertextually*, ed. Richard B. Hays, Stefan Alkier, and Leroy Andrew Huizenga (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 252–53 n. 27.

2 The Semiotics of Anti-Imperialism

Umberto Eco's semiotics provides a helpful template to reveal anti-imperial interpretants otherwise hidden in the text.¹⁹ Stefan Alkier's concept of *Haftpunkt* offers a mechanism for changing encyclopedias (code-switching). After describing these processes, I will offer a quick look at the way these *Haftpunkte* work in the Epistle of Barnabas, bringing support to the argument that the universe of discourse of that text situates itself among Second Temple and Christian debates rather than against a monolithic Jewish theology. Next, in the Gospel of John, in the narrative of the trial before Pilate, *Haftpunkte* will be shown to open a Roman encyclopedia which allows the author to portray Jesus as Caesar. The universe of discourse that the text creates helps interpreters choose among cultural units for particular signs, for example for ληστής as a designation for Barnabas in John 18:40. This semiotic work leads to a nuanced and anti-imperial characterization of Pilate.

2.1 *Haftpunkte* for (Code-)Switching Encyclopedias

One day, walking along the coast in Belgium with my American family, I thought I understood a father speaking to his daughter, “Annie! Stop het!” As the conversation continued in Flemish, I realized I had opened the wrong language’s encyclopedia. In multi-cultural and multilingual environments, speakers and writers must signal from within the universe of discourse which encyclopedia they are using. Stefan Alkier uses the term *Haftpunkte* (points of adhesion) to describe these signals.²⁰ Especially to change the universe of discourse of a text, the author will use several words or phrases that adhere fully to the new encyclopedia to alert readers to the shift.

These shifts, in a term borrowed from structuralism, are called code-switches.²¹ They happen between languages, as when, perhaps, I am telling an American friend about my teen years in Belgium and refer to my Athénée instead of my high school. But they can also happen between cultural encyclopedias. Recently at a mid-March biblical studies conference, Chris Shea got up to present and prefaced her remarks by saying, “I’m a classicist. Please be kind. It’s the Ides of March, and that’s not a good day for us.”²² By referencing the day of Julius Caesar’s as-

¹⁹ For the systemic practices obscuring resistance in hidden transcripts, see Laura Robinson's chapter in this volume.

²⁰ Stefan Alkier, *Wunder und Wirklichkeit in den Briefen des Apostels Paulus: Ein Beitrag zu einem Wunderverständnis jenseits von Entmythologisierung und Rehistorisierung*, WUNT 134 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 71.

²¹ Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 70–75.

²² Chris Shea, “Acts 10–12 and the Little Passion of Peter” (paper presented at the Midwest Regional Meeting for Biblical Studies, Saint Mary’s College; Notre Dame, IN, 14 March 2025).

sassination, she immediately and very skillfully shifted our primary encyclopedia for her paper from the Bible to the classical world.

The Gospel of John, at the beginning of chapter 4, highlights the shift from Judaea to Samaria using *Haftpunkte*: “he left Judaea” (v. 3); “Samaria” (v. 4); “city of Samaria” (v. 5); “woman from Samaria” (v. 7); “Samaritan woman” (2x; v. 9). This repetition of words that remind readers of the setting of this pericope underlines the need to look for meaning in the cultural units related to Samaritan rather than Judaean culture. This is why the use of “Messiah” (v. 25) and “savior of the world” (v. 42) come as such a surprise, because as Second Temple and Roman phrases, they seem so out of place.

Although some of the drawbacks of semiotics will be discussed below, these phrases illustrate an initial limitation. When signs from outside encyclopedias not signaled through *Haftpunkte* appear in a text, a semiotic approach can only (a) posit the existence of other unknown cultural units within the encyclopedia signaled by the universe of discourse, or (b) suppose that these signs, although seemingly foreign, have been thoroughly assimilated into the encyclopedia in use by the text (this assimilation will be discussed further in Section 3.1), or (c) suppose that they constitute clear triggers for an interpretant that relies on an encyclopedia different from the rest of the universe of discourse. In the latter case, the signs might be seen as new *Haftpunkte* working to change the encyclopedia for the subsequent text. In John 4, it is difficult to decide between the Second Temple or Roman encyclopedias for vv. 43–54. But if “savior of the world” in John 4:42 is a *Haftpunkt* reminder that Galilee is a place of Roman domination, when the “royal” (βασιλικός) comes up in v. 46 one might opt for the translation “imperial officer” instead of the more usual “royal official” (e.g., CEB, NIVue, NIV).²³ To show the way *Haftpunkte* work in general, we will first look at a Second Temple encyclopedia and then at a Roman one.

2.2 Second Temple *Haftpunkte* in the Epistle of Barnabas

The Epistle of Barnabas opens with a series of signs with cultural units that are generally shared between both Second Temple and New Testament encyclopedias: the pouring out of the spirit (Barn. 1.3), “the Lord’s fountain” (Barn. 1.3), and “the way of righteousness” (Barn. 1.4).²⁴ The author (here called Barnabas) also crafts his own universe of discourse in the text by using, for example, the phrase “God’s righteous acts toward you” (1.2; τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ δικαιώματα

²³ Wendy E. S. North, *What John Knew and What John Wrote: A Study in John and the Synoptics*, Interpreting Johannine Literature (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2020), 71–105.

²⁴ The words ἐκχέω and πνεῦμα are used similarly in Joel 3.1, 2; Zech 12.10; Acts 2:33; 10:45; cf. Rom 5:5. The use in Barn. 1.3 of πτηγή and κύριος is similar to Joel 4:18; Jer 17:13 with perhaps a reference to the promised land (Deut 8:7). And ὁδός and δίκαιοσύνη are quite commonly used together, e.g., in Gen 18:19; Tob 1:3; 4:5; Ps 5:9; Isa 33:15; Bar 4:13, with similar phrases in Prov 8:20; 12:28; 16:17, 31; 17:23; 21:16, 21, and an exact match in Job 24:13 and in Matt 21:32.

εἰς ὑμᾶς). While similar phrases are sometimes used in other texts of the period (e.g., Luke 1:6; Rom 1:32; 2:26; Deut 10:13; Bar 4:13; T. Levi 14.4) they always refer to the righteousness human beings owe to God, not to God's righteousness to people, as here. Thus, Barnabas has established for his audience a textual universe of discourse situated broadly within a Second Temple encyclopedia which he marked with *Haftpunkte* and with his own sign that marginally edits that encyclopedia.

In Barn. 2, however, the author begins quoting specifically from the LXX, starting with Isa 1:11–13 and a combined quotation from Jer 7:22–23 and Zech 8:17. He continues these quotations almost exclusively for two chapters and then extensively throughout the rest of the letter. These quotations are perhaps too heavy-handed to be called *points* of adhesion (*Haftpunkte*). Nevertheless, they clearly focus Barnabas's encyclopedia on the Septuagint.

Previous debates have centered on the circumstances and purposes of the letter, whether an anti-Jewish screed aimed to re-appropriate the Septuagint for Christians or evidence of an internal debate among all of those reading the Septuagint in a time before the parting of the ways. While a semiotic analysis does not definitively solve the problem, the opening of this Septuagintal encyclopedia does suggest that the author is participating in exegetical debates focused there. Peter Tomson's analysis is particularly relevant because although he does not mention semiotics, he pays attention to all three elements of the triad: the evidence of events in Jerusalem and among the Romans (possible objects), and Second Temple, Christian, and Rabbinic discourse (encyclopedias). He positions the Epistle of Barnabas among Christian gentiles as "a first, radical formulation of Christian supersessionism vis-à-vis Judaism."²⁵

However, Barnabas nowhere uses the sign "Jews," which would inevitably open a cultural unit referring to people contemporary to him. Instead, he writes of "Israel" (e.g., Barn. 5.2), which opens instead a cultural unit found in the past. This identity can be debated, which suggests an author claiming it for his audience in contrast to other groups with varying gentile and other Second Temple identities worshipping YHWH with or without reference to Jesus.²⁶ Thus, the text would then not be anti-Jewish, but instead positions itself against multiple other competing identities.

A focus on the encyclopedia within which the author unfolds the universe of discourse of the text along with the possible referents of important signs highlights the value the author and his audience place on the Septuagint as a basis for

²⁵ Peter J. Tomson, "The Didache, Matthew, and Barnabas as Sources for Early Second Century Jewish and Christian History," in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: How to Write Their History*, ed. Peter J. Tomson and Joshua Schwartz (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2014), 362.

²⁶ Julien C. H. Smith, "The Epistle of Barnabas and the Two Ways of Teaching Authority," *VC* 68.5 (2014).

their self-identity and theology.²⁷ While this example left no doubt as to the encyclopedia of the overall letter, the next example shows the way a text can shift its universe of discourse to a different encyclopedia through the use of *Haftpunkte*.

2.3 Roman *Haftpunkte* in the Gospel of John

The Johannine trial narrative provides a good example of a passage whose universe of discourse is mainly grounded in a Roman encyclopedia, despite the extensive use of a Second Temple encyclopedia in the rest of the Gospel. Latin words are borrowed into John's Greek in a way that, as we will see, allows him to negotiate power between Jesus and Caesar. Although Mark is often categorized as the most Roman of the four Gospels, twenty-one Latin loanwords are used in the Gospel of Mark thirty-one times, mostly in sections related to Roman topics (Mark 12:13–17; 15:15–18, 39, 43–45). But John uses eighteen Latinisms thirty-two times, and while they are less focused than Mark's, they come up quite often in 18:28–33a and 19:7–20, reasonably so since these passages begin and end the trial before Pilate. The repetition of πραιτώριον in 18:28 (2x), 33 (and then again in 19:9) is especially noteworthy, as those first three uses can be considered *Haftpunkte*, signaling with a Latin loanword the opening of a Roman cultural encyclopedia. As we move through this analysis, it is important to note at the outset that given the unfolding power differentials in the Roman world in the first and second centuries CE, the developing Christian critique of Imperial Rome will necessarily be more muted and perhaps even hidden than the developing Christian critique of Judaism.²⁸

Once interpreters recognize that the text has signaled the opening of a Roman encyclopedia, other interpretants for the pericope become possible. The words βασιλεύς and βασιλεία (18:36–37), for example, might better refer to an emperor and an empire rather than a king and a kingdom.²⁹ Furthermore, as Jesus is dressed and hailed as a Roman emperor (19:2–5), the audience might recognize that, ironic as this *acclamatio* might be, the earlier narrative had already given Jesus the approbation of God (e.g., 12:27–33), the consensus of the people (12:12–15) and the *recusatio* that proved Jesus's fitness to rule through his humility (6:15).³⁰ The reference to empire is especially evident in 19:15 where Οὐκ ἔχομεν βασιλέα εἰ μὴ Καίσαρα is usually translated "We have no king but Caesar" (NIV, NRSVue). But since Caesar is not a king, this phrase is better translated, "We have no emperor but Caesar."

²⁷ As William S. Campbell has noted: "identity precedes theology; ... in fact theological constructions emerge to solve the problem of identity rather than to create it"; *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 52.

²⁸ For more on hidden transcripts, see the chapter by Laura Robinson in this volume.

²⁹ Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 144–52.

³⁰ Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 152–75.

As Pilate has Jesus brought out of the *praetorium*, this beaten, bleeding man wearing a crown of laurel-like thorns and a purple robe ironically recalls Virgil's *Aeneid* (6.791) and Anchises presenting the shade of Augustus to his son. Within this Roman narrative, the phrase in John 19:4, 'Ιδοὺ ὁ ἄνθρωπος, is similar enough to *hic vir, hic est* to constitute a reference to "this is the man, this in truth is he whom you so often hear promised you, Augustus Caesar, son of a god" (adapted from Fairclough, Goold, LCL). And three verses later, "the Jews" accuse Jesus of having that title, too, "Son of God" (υἱὸς θεοῦ).³¹

In my thesis I argued that the main concern of John 18:28–19:22 revolved around loyalty. Both Pilate and "the Jews" demonstrated their loyalty to Caesar, but Jesus ambiguously declared his loyalty to YHWH while John presented him in the guise of a Caesar. The narrative thus invites the audience to an allegiance to a man validated as worthy of being a *princeps*. Thus, John elevates Jesus above Caesar in honor while holding back from promoting outright sedition (18:36). But once the cultural encyclopedia of a passage has been determined, ambiguous cultural units for signs within that pericope can be clarified, as we will see in the next section.

2.4 Constructing an Anti-Imperial Universe of Discourse

The description of Jesus in the previous paragraph came from the universe of discourse that the text constructs, using a Roman encyclopedia for the signs in the text. The text guided the process of abduction to choose which cultural units were relevant within the universe of discourse that it was creating. Attention to this process can remove some ambiguities.

Jan van der Watt has described the way C. H. Dodd argued that background information (cultural units) from many different cultures should all be used together to understand John's symbols.³² This gathering of ancient cultural units helps interpreters survey all possible interpretants of an ancient text.³³ As interpreters removed from the cultural worlds of the texts we read, we must assemble all the historically-defensible possibilities we can, although this process is inevitably always incomplete as will be discussed below. However, it is illegitimate to import all of the possible cultural units at once, as van der Watt explains.³⁴ The text itself must guide us in our choices not only of those cultural units relevant to the discourse that the text is creating, but also of the ways the universe of discourse of the text might edit the relevant units.

³¹ Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 211–41.

³² Jan van der Watt, "Symbolism in John's Gospel: An Evaluation of Dodd's Contribution," in *Engaging with C. H. Dodd on the Gospel of John: Sixty Years of Tradition and Interpretation*, ed. Tom Thatcher and Catrin H. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 67.

³³ van der Watt, "Symbolism," 76.

³⁴ van der Watt, "Symbolism," 68–69.

While examples of the latter phenomenon will not be discussed here, the word λῃστής (John 10:1, 3; 18:40) demonstrates the way the universe of discourse of a text can guide the audience towards an anti-imperial reading. This word is first encountered in John 10 in a metaphor about sheep, shepherds and sheepfolds.³⁵ When scholars translate λῃστής as “bandit” in John 10 (e.g., NRSVue), they are only referencing one of the two input spaces that contribute to the blend. The thieves and bandits who attempt to steal sheep away from their owner map onto unauthorized leaders who attempt to lead people away from their proper leader.³⁶ In the context of Jesus arguing with a few Pharisees (9:39–41), the universe of discourse of the text guides the audience towards an interpretation in which the unauthorized leaders include the Pharisees he is addressing.³⁷

However, the word is used again later to describe Barabbas (18:40) and, as we have seen, the universe of discourse has by that verse guided the abduction of the listener towards a Roman encyclopedia. In Rome, the authorized leader is Caesar, and leaders who are unauthorized are rebels, the other cultural unit for λῃστής (BDAG).³⁸ Thus, as the text crafts a universe in which Jesus was Caesar, to offer the crowd a choice between a rebel and a Caesar adds to the legitimacy of Jesus as a rightful ruler, even for Romans.³⁹

A semiotic approach, then, can answer interpretive questions within a text by employing the abductive process with its encyclopedia to make choices among a sign’s cultural units, especially when that choice coheres with the developing theme of the text. Additionally, attention to the proper cultural encyclopedia can correct broader conclusions, for example about the attributes of characters within the narrative.

2.5 Using Semiotics in the Gospel of John

A semiotic approach that looks to the Roman encyclopedia for the cultural units in John 18:28–19:22 can tighten up interpretations offered by others. Jerome Neyrey, for example, has been influential in applying social-scientific models to the Gospel of John. His analyses recognize ancient cultures’ economic patronage systems and their highly agonistic competitions for honor, for example. These

³⁵ For the use of metaphor theory in anti-imperial readings, see Erin M. Heim’s chapter in this volume.

³⁶ Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 270.

³⁷ Thompson, *John*, 224; cf. 382.

³⁸ Note that lexical information does not always map neatly onto cultural units but in this case the two meanings of λῃστής with the examples listed provide a good approximation. See the brief discussion on lexical meanings and cultural units in Section 1.3 above.

³⁹ Jörg Frey, “Jesus und Pilatus: Der wahre König und der Repräsentant des Kaisers im Johannesevangelium,” in *Christ and the Emperor: The Gospel Evidence*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle and Joseph Verheyden, BTS 20 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 372. For the practice of obscuring such resistance in hidden transcripts, see Laura Robinson’s chapter in this volume.

have elucidated aspects of texts previously unexplored.⁴⁰ But, perhaps led astray by the strong polemic in this Gospel against “the Jews,” Neyrey’s analysis missed their marginalized status in the Roman world (the object for the text).⁴¹ He also has sometime omitted the Roman cultural units for some signs, such as taking one’s own life (John 8:22) or refusing to take up the mantle of rule when it is offered (*recusatio*; 6:15).⁴²

The character of Pilate is a good test case because it has been variously understood in the past. While some see him as having taunted “the Jews,” others describe him as weak and easily manipulated.⁴³ It is true that the historical Pilate, as all governors, held a weak position in the empire and needed to enforce Jewish loyalty to Rome. However, he only needed the obedience of some Jews that would hold the rest in check; within that margin, he had room to promote or demote or even execute whomever he wished.⁴⁴ This historical reality about Roman governors, necessarily well known by subjugated people, was the object that prompted common tropes about governors, who enacted loyalty to Caesar and rapaciousness towards the conquered, but who intended to stop short of provoking outright rebellion. With the Roman encyclopedia that organizes this tension in mind, John’s discourse in 18:28–19:22 can be better understood when all of its signs are guided by an abduction that assumes for the sign “Pilate” a man who is weak vis-à-vis Caesar and strong vis-à-vis “the Jews.”⁴⁵

This analysis of Pilate’s character grounded in a Roman encyclopedia lays the groundwork for another anti-imperial element of the portrayal of Jesus. Pilate, as a relatively important power broker, is nevertheless beholden to Caesar who holds his rule from the gods. Jesus claims that he, too, holds his empire from another world (18:36), and that assertion, especially in the presence of the other signs in the trial narrative with imperial cultural units for Jesus, puts him on par with Caesar. John stops short of describing a Jesus who dismantles the empire,

⁴⁰ Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴¹ Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 38–39; citing Jerome H. Neyrey, *An Ideology of Revolt: John’s Christology in Social-Science Perspective* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988), 125.

⁴² Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 231, 427–28. For Roman cultural units on those topics, see Jason J. Ripley, “Glorious Death, Imperial Rome, and the Gospel of John” *JGRChJ* 15 (2019): 31–76 and Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 154–59.

⁴³ E.g., Christopher M. Tuckett, “Pilate in John 18–19: A Narrative-Critical Approach,” in *Narrativity in Biblical and Related Texts: La narrativité dans la Bible et les textes apparentés*, ed. George J. Brooke and Jean-Daniel Kaestli, BETL (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000); Martinus C. de Boer, “The Narrative Function of Pilate in John,” in *Narrativity in Biblical and Related Texts: La narrativité dans la Bible et les textes apparentés*, ed. George J. Brooke and Jean-Daniel Kaestli, BETL (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 296.

⁴⁵ Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 147–54.

however (18:11, 36; 19:11). Instead, and ironically, Jesus is emperor, and Caesar has become a client king.⁴⁶

An awareness of semiotics, then, can prompt studies that recognize *Haftpunkte* that change the cultural encyclopedia of a text. This recognition in turn allows interpreters to notice Roman cultural units in abductive processes within that encyclopedia. As helpful as this approach can be, however, like all theoretical constructions, it does have some limitations.

3 Limitations of Semiotics

This chapter has shown the process and some of the results of applying semiotics to ancient texts, and particularly the gains in uncovering anti-imperial readings. However, the method is not without drawbacks. When opening a Roman or Second Temple encyclopedia, we ought to notice the missing pages. Furthermore, as readers ourselves we must suspect that much of the time opening our own cultural encyclopedias is so natural and automatic that we substitute its pages for the missing Roman and Second Temple ones. Additionally, centuries of passing time have mostly erased the objects that prompted the signs we are reading. Before drawing conclusions about the usefulness of semiotics, these three limitations must be briefly acknowledged.

3.1 Missing Pages in Ancient Encyclopedias

The first hindrance in applying semiotics to ancient texts is that we only have partial evidence primarily from the highest social strata of the ancient world. That means that some cultural units and *Haftpunkte* are simply unavailable to us. Today, references to Berlin and Brazzaville, New Delhi and New York carry quite different cultural units that are recoverable through visits and study. But the cultural units of ancient cities (along with every other sign) are less accessible. Perhaps we have evidence about Rome, Ephesus and Jerusalem, and Babylon can be the center of an evil empire or a center of Jewish learning, depending on the text. But Laodicea and Miletus are harder to recover. Many of our descriptions of cultural groups come from elite writing centered in Greece and Rome, and knowing how groups of people are described by conquerors is not the same as knowing how people described themselves with their own patterns of language.⁴⁷

Furthermore, when words are borrowed from other languages, they may or may not continue to carry a reference to their language of origin. English speakers generally recognize both the words “piazza” and “pajama,” but the first

⁴⁶ Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 46–47.

⁴⁷ Mary T. Boatwright, *Peoples of the Roman World*, Cambridge Introduction to Roman Civilization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 14–16.

continues to carry Italian resonances while the second, for many, no longer has an Indian cultural unit.⁴⁸ Determining cultural specificity for ancient loanwords is dependent on our partial evidence. Furthermore, even cultural units that are recoverable from the ancient world are not completely recoverable by any one scholar. As hard as we work and as much as we read, none of us will ever achieve the unconscious competence of ancient audiences. And because our own competencies are inevitably partial, our own contemporary assumptions slip into our abductions of ancient texts.

3.2 *Invisible Assumptions of Contemporary Encyclopedias*

In addition to the missing pages in our ancient encyclopedias that would help us in determining the presence of *Haftpunkte* in a text, readers removed from both the language and the culture of ancient writings will inevitably fail to notice present-day cultural units that slip into their abductive processes. The sign-object-interpretant triad functions automatically in everyday communication. Especially when exegesis proceeds based on a New Testament text translated into English, interpreters will inevitably tend to connect signs to cultural units that are usual in English.

In my classes, I find that marriages, households, eating practices and worship are all cognitive spaces that generate words whose English translations connect to vastly different cultural units today than in the past. And while some of these differences are clear enough in the scholarly imagination, others are not so. Until just recently, for example, it had not occurred to me that the discussion of birth in John 3:1–21 might open through its ancient cultural unit the question of lineage.⁴⁹

The problem of slippage between ancient and contemporary encyclopedias is endemic in all interpretations of ancient texts, but it will also cause some *Haftpunkte* to be invisible or at least camouflaged. Cultural units of words and symbols are “socially and historically determined; the contents of ancient domains should not be confused with the content of current domains relating to the same issue.”⁵⁰ Our assumptions create a real need for the readings of the whole scholarly community, and they make imperative the participation of people with as many different contemporary encyclopedias as possible, so that through our different assumptions we can notice holes in our ancient knowledge. As important as this personal humility for interpreters is, there is (at least) one more aspect of semiotic analysis missing for ancient texts.

⁴⁸ Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 73–74.

⁴⁹ Alicia D. Myers, *Blessed among Women? Mothers and Motherhood in the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 86).

⁵⁰ van der Watt, “Symbolism,” 75.

3.3 The Missing Ingredient of Ancient Semiotic Triads

Written communication adds an extra level of difficulty. In semiotics, signs both organize the world and respond to the ways the world impinges on the author. Signs are then expressed in response to the object. But they are conveyed within encyclopedias that are shared within communities, and the interpretant of the sign-object process arises from the sign-object-interpretant triad that the listener shares. Because of that shared cultural encyclopedia, the author knows the necessary clues to provide for the readers to abduct to the intended cultural units from the signs. But the working of this semiotic triad relies on repeated real-world communicative acts that depend on the presence of real-world objects to establish communicative patterns.

For texts written in the ancient world, however, the reader is not in the presence of the object. If we go back to the gasp of the passenger in a vehicle moving past the dog, ancient texts give us the equivalent of only the gasp and perhaps a general sense of the existence of driving, roads and animals in our culture. We only have scholarly reconstructions to use as objects, and they need careful testing for anachronistic assumptions and for ancient relevance.⁵¹ Objects in the historical past cannot be reconstructed directly from texts.

3.4 The Usefulness of Semiotics

Despite these drawbacks, semiotics can bring additional clarity to previous anti-imperial scholarship.⁵² Lance Byron Richey, for example, in his discussion of ἐξουσία in John, argued that Jesus was portrayed with ἐξουσία as absolute power, but not with ἐξουσία as delegated authority nor with ἐξουσία as authority given to Jesus as a result of his virtues.⁵³ He grounded this argument in what he understood to be John's Christology, where there could be no mutual consent between ruler and governed, nor virtues required to legitimate Jesus's teaching which was simply given by God.

However, in his discussion, Richey equated the meanings of *potestas*, ἐξουσία, and power and opposed them to *auctoritas*, ὀξιώμα, and influence. He overlooked the distinct cultural units in the encyclopedias of the three languages and argued instead to build a meaning in English based on some of the Roman cultural units of the Latin words behind the Greek used by John. Furthermore, although ἐξουσία was a common translation of *imperium*, Richey left the cultural units of that word out of the discussion. As a result, he concluded that "in con-

⁵¹ I have argued elsewhere that Bayes' Theorem and Social Identity Theory can mitigate some of these drawbacks; Hunt, "Triangulating."

⁵² Because I am less familiar with Pauline scholarship, I have opted to engage with anti-imperial Johannine scholars despite my appreciation for Christoph Heilig's work.

⁵³ Lance Byron Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, CBQMS 43 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 76–79.

trast to the emperor's conditional authority, John proclaims Christ's absolute power.”⁵⁴

However, adding a discussion of the cultural units of *imperium* and more careful distinctions between Latin, Greek, and English encyclopedias highlights that John does use ἐξουσία as a reference to authority that is delegated (John 5:26–27; 10:18; 17:1–2). And when the universe of discourse is taken into account, we see that the text also, in Roman fashion, provides legitimization for Jesus's authority through the approbation of the people and of God (12:12–15; 28–30). Thus, John describes a Jesus more comparable to Caesar than Richey assumes.⁵⁵

This conclusion, however, contrasts with a tendency in anti-imperial analyses to always uncover a Jesus who is in all ways greater than Caesar. David Rensberger, for example, has argued that Jesus “in the end strips [Pilate] of the authority he thinks is his.”⁵⁶ But Umberto Eco's object pushes interpreters to remember that the Gospel of John did not, in fact, motivate a revolution against Rome or even a proclamation against all Roman authority. At the same time, the Gospel did not, as has sometimes been claimed on the basis of John 18:36, construct for Jesus an empire in a different, spiritual dimension completely separate from the Roman Empire. Such a text would have produced much more gnostic or platonic Christians less concerned with caring for the poor than the evidence shows (e.g., Julian, *Fragments of a Letter to a Priest* 305C). Thus, it is important in interpretation to keep in mind the semiotic object of those Jesus-believers who neither rebelled nor ignored the material world.⁵⁷ Eco's semiotic triad of sign-object-interpretant can help organize these discussions and also preclude some of the more extreme anti-imperial conclusions.⁵⁸

4 Conclusion

Despite some limitations, Umberto Eco's semiotics still provides a valuable tool for discerning and interpreting anti-imperial texts. As discussed above, the semiotic triad consists of the sign-object-interpretant relationship. The sign is the language used to communicate: words, phrases, even sounds and gestures. The object is the reality that impinges on the senses, whatever prompts the act of communication. The sign does not represent that reality completely, nor as it exists in some objective sense, but instead the sign represents the aspect of reality

⁵⁴ Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology*, 82.

⁵⁵ Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 180–85.

⁵⁶ David Rensberger, *Overcoming the World: Politics and Community in the Gospel of John* (London: SPCK, 1989), 98.

⁵⁷ Millenarian movements could nuance this conclusion.

⁵⁸ For a more detailed discussion of these tensions, see Hunt, “Triangulating.”

as the speaker or writer understands and wants to communicate it. If I tell a new acquaintance, “We have one dog and three cats,” I am not attempting to represent the animals in all their biological and chemical complexity. Rather I want my new friend to understand the cultural units of dogs and cats as our culture constructs them as pets.⁵⁹ If the person I am speaking to shares the same cultural encyclopedia that I am using, this act of communication should trigger the creation of a corresponding interpretant that the listener can access.

This process works in texts when the universe of discourse guides readers to the correct encyclopedia for the cultural units of its signs. Texts expect various levels of competencies of their readers and may open themselves by offering explanations to several different groups of readers. Still, they craft their message using the semiotic triads available to them, editing cultural units through the universe of discourse as necessary.

Haftpunkte may signal readers to switch to a different encyclopedia for a whole text or only for a section of it; noticing these signals can help readers identify the cultural discourses within which texts speak. In this way, Roman *Haftpunkte* guide the abduction of the Johannine trial narrative, highlighting the way it presents a Jesus who ironically fulfills Roman expectations for an emperor. This kind of abductive journey can also settle debates about the cultural units raised by specific signs and improve character studies of the narrative. Additionally, other tools such as those described in the rest of this book can add data to interpretive efforts, and Bayes Theorem and Social Identity Theory can bolster historical reconstructions and models for group behavior that might prompt or result from the texts in question.

Careful interpretation depends on slowing down the communicative process and testing every aspect of it for flaws and erroneous assumptions. Umberto Eco’s semiotics offers a systematic analysis of what are, after all, dynamic but everyday communicative events. His concepts allow us to break apart our naïve readings and put them back together using cultural units more appropriate to the ancient world. In this way, semiotics is a useful tool in anti-imperial analysis.

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⁵⁹ Hunt, *Jesus Caesar*, 9 n. 34.

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Metaphor Theories

Metaphors as Tools of Resistance

Erin M. Heim

From ancient political writings to contemporary political speeches and propaganda, political discourse has always been laden with metaphor. Some political metaphors are powerfully persuasive, and some have become so conventional that they almost escape notice. Nevertheless, whether particular metaphors are noticed or unnoticed, modern metaphor theorists have conclusively shown that not only is metaphor pervasive, it is indispensable for communication.¹

As in modern political discourse, metaphors are ubiquitous and easily identifiable in ancient political discourses. Take, for example, Plato's extended metaphor of city as *psyche* in his *Republic*, or Aristotle's body politic (*Pol.* 3.11). Aristotle also portrays politicians as craftsmen (*Pol.* 1.13), and Cicero (along with many other ancient politicians) employs nautical metaphors in discourses describing the changing fortunes of politics in terms of a ship navigating the seas (e.g., *Cic. Leg.* 3.28; *Cic. Sest.*; cf. *Varro, Ling.* 9.6). Metaphors also often appear in political propaganda, whether ancient or modern. Roman imperial propaganda frequently employed stylised myths and tropes against their enemies, painting them as ethnically “other” through the use of thick symbols drawn from their national myths and legends.² Conversely, the Caesars called themselves the *pater patriae* (Father of the Fatherland) speaking of the empire as household and themselves as its head.³ These metaphors are not mere decoration; they shape

¹ For a helpful overview of the history of metaphor studies see the three Cambridge handbooks on the interpretation of metaphor: Andrew Ortony, ed., *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Andrew Ortony, ed., *Metaphor and Thought*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Raymond W. Gibbs Jr., ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

² For an analysis of this phenomenon in conversation with the writings of the New Testament see Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010). Writings from minority groups also frequently drew upon animal metaphors in their writings opposing the Roman empire (see Marie Roux, *Animalizing the Romans: The Use of Animal Metaphors by Ancient Authors to Criticize Roman Power or Its Agents* [Rome: Publications de l'École française de Rome, 2020]).

³ Metaphors are also ubiquitous in modern political propaganda. For analyses of contemporary political metaphor that engages with contemporary theories of metaphor see Manuela Romano, ed., *Metaphor in Socio-Political Contexts: Current Crises* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2024); Andreas Musolff, *Political Metaphor Analysis: Discourse and Scenarios* (London: Bloomsbury,

the individual and collective consciousness of a nation's citizens and subjects, and they suggest and condition appropriate attitudes, emotions and behaviours from the citizenry.

The texts of the New Testament also deploy metaphors in political discourse. Some, such as Jesus' retort regarding Herod's threat, "Go and tell that fox, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work'" (Luke 13:32), draws on a fairly standard insult.⁴ Others, such as Revelation 17's vivid description of Rome as the Whore of Babylon,⁵ subverts the familiar image of Rome as a virtuous woman,⁶ and instead speaks of Rome's economic excesses and human exploitation in terms of sexual licentiousness and Rome's defeat in terms of sexual violation (Rev 17:15–18; 18:3; 19:2).

These brief examples are set in an obviously political context, and are perhaps therefore safely classed "anti-imperial" in a general sense. However, in the case of most metaphors in the New Testament, the question of whether a metaphor is "anti-imperial" does not, as I will argue, have a straightforward answer. Even in the case of obvious political metaphors such as those in Revelation, assessing whether a metaphor has anti-imperial content or provokes an anti-imperial response ought to be a holistic enterprise that attends to a metaphor's context, its cognitive and affective content, its social function, its connection to other texts where similar metaphors occur, and its reception in later texts. Applying this holistic interpretive framework to a metaphor may shed some light on what impact a given metaphor had on anti-imperial attitudes and behaviours of its hearers.

Though they are underutilised in biblical studies generally, and in Empire Studies in particular, contemporary theories of metaphor provide interpreters with a set of tools to assess the anti-imperial content of the New Testament's metaphors, and as such may act as a complementary hermeneutical framework alongside other methodologies. To be sure, previous studies in empire criticism have probed various NT metaphors for anti-imperial content, and one does

2016); M. Hanne, W.D. Crano, and J.S. Mio, eds., *Warring with Words: Narrative and Metaphor in Politics* (New York: Psychology Press, 2014).

⁴ For a discussion of this metaphor see John A. Darr, *Herod the Fox: Audience Criticism and Lukian Characterization*, JSNTSup 163 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

⁵ I have used the term "Whore" (capitalised throughout) in this chapter because it gets at the pejorative connotations of πόρνη that are present in the passage. I have used the more neutral terms "sex work" and "sex worker" when it was necessary to differentiate between the practices of flesh-and-blood persons and the stylised portrayal of Rome/Babylon as Whore in Revelation 17.

⁶ For John's parody of Roma as the Whore of Babylon see especially Stephen Moore's chapter, "Raping Rome" in his *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014); see also David Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 919–28.

not necessarily need to use contemporary metaphor theory to arrive at a robust articulation of a wide array of facets of metaphors in an NT text. Indeed, many previous studies arrive at insights that might also have been reached through metaphor theory, which perhaps demonstrates that while contemporary theories of metaphor are helpful for attaining a certain level of methodological precision, the interpretation of metaphors is also an intuitive human activity. For example, Heilig's analysis of Paul's triumph metaphor in 2 Corinthians 2:14 makes various observations about the metaphor's rhetorical impact, including a detailed discussion of the metaphor's impact on perception,⁷ and these insights are of a similar kind to those found in studies that explicitly engage with one or more contemporary theories of metaphor.⁸ Heilig's monograph, *The Apostle and the Empire* goes a bit further in its use of insights from metaphor studies and cognitive linguistics; he effectively points out the pitfalls and problems that arise when exegetes lexicalise and decode metaphors.⁹ Likewise, various studies on Revelation have arrived at potent articulations of the anti-imperial content of the apocalypse's imagery, though few have explicitly employed theories of metaphor in their analysis.¹⁰ In a publication especially pertinent for my worked example below, Justin Winzenburg uses Searle's Speech-Act theory to arrive at a nuanced and sensitive reading of the armour of God in Ephesians 6:10–20.¹¹ Winzenburg argues convincingly “the referent of the powers in Ephesians does not need to be reduced exclusively to earthly imperial powers and rulers for the passage to have functioned as a challenge to imperial ideology.”¹² As I will discuss in more detail below in my exegesis of Ephesians 6:10–20, Winzenburg's insight comports well with contemporary metaphor theories which insist that a metaphor's meaning is somewhat elastic, and thus the same textual metaphor may have functioned as a challenge to imperial ideology for some hearers/readers and perhaps not have functioned this way for others.

⁷ Christoph Heilig, *Paul's Triumph: Reassessing 2 Corinthians 2:14 in Its Literary and Historical Context* (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 247–59.

⁸ For a list of studies on a range of NT metaphors that utilise contemporary metaphor theories see Erin Heim, “Metaphor in the New Testament,” *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, in Biblical Studies, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-0333.xml> (accessed 9 Apr. 2025).

⁹ Christoph Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire: Paul's Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome*, with a foreword by John M. G. Barclay (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 60–72; 106–12.

¹⁰ For studies on Revelation that attend methodologically to metaphor and discuss anti-imperial aspects of the text see e.g., David deSilva, *Seeing Things John's Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville: WJK, 2009); Lynn R. Huber, *Like a Bride Adorned: Reading Metaphor in John's Apocalypse* (New York/London: T&T Clark International, 2007). The anti-imperial imagery in Rev 17 will be discussed in more detail below.

¹¹ Justin Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire: An Evaluation of the Epistle's Subversion of Roman Imperial Ideology*, WUNT II/573 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

¹² Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*, 206.

In arguing for a recovery of an imperial context and lively Roman background for the triumph metaphor, Heilig observes, “I think it is safe to argue that yet another reason why the crucial aspects of the Roman background of Paul’s metaphor in 2 Cor 2:14 were overlooked for such a long time lies in the fact that a lot of research carried out in New Testament studies is still rooted in outdated methodology.”¹³ Though Heilig was speaking of the correction cognitive linguistics makes to some forms of historical-grammatical exegesis, the same might equally be said about applying contemporary theories of metaphor to the exegesis of NT texts, and perhaps in particular in studies that seek to determine whether a given text presents a challenge to imperial ideology. As I will show in the examples below, contemporary theories of metaphor can be meaningfully applied to NT metaphors to add precision, depth, and nuance to assessments of whether these texts should be thought of as anti-imperial or imperial-critical. Taking again, for example, Winzenburg’s assertion above that a metaphor’s referent need not be reduced to “earthly imperial powers” in order to challenge imperial ideology, metaphor theories can explain *why* this imagery has the capacity to function this way with reference to how metaphor-makers and metaphor-users make meaning. Thus for those interested in imperial-critical questions, metaphor theories have a particular sort of explanatory power that dovetails nicely with other methodologies.

In this chapter, I will first give an overview of contemporary theories of metaphor that are best suited to the analysis of political metaphors, illustrating the method in conversation with a New Testament metaphor that is more straightforwardly anti-imperial: The Judgment of the Whore of Babylon in Revelation 17. Then I will apply the tools and questions of modern metaphor theory more fulsomely in an analysis of Ephesians 6:10–20.¹⁴ The armour of God is helpful for assessing the usefulness of metaphor theories for detecting anti-imperial content because it is not straightforwardly directed at the Roman Empire (unlike, e.g., Rev 17). There is no scholarly consensus on whether Ephesians is an anti-imperial document, nor has much attention been paid to whether the armour of God is anti-imperial.¹⁵ In studies that do discuss Ephesians 6:10–20 specifically, some contemporary interpretations have read the metaphor as an anti-imperial

¹³ Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire*, 106.

¹⁴ Although there are other texts in the New Testament that use armour/warfare metaphors, it is not helpful to speak of the meaning of a metaphor across contexts. As we will see below in the discussion of the metaphor’s reception, the same imagery may have anti-imperial sentiments in one context but not in another.

¹⁵ See Winzenburg’s helpful literature review of Ephesians and Empire scholarship (*Ephesians and Empire*, 1–27). Winzenburg argues that readings which partition the spiritual and political, such as those by Elliott and Clinton Arnold (*Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1989]; *Ephesians*, ZECNT [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010], 31–41), continue “to fuel one of the main objections against anti-imperial readings of the epistle” (*Ephesians and Empire*, 12).

image,¹⁶ and some have read it as an accommodationist text.¹⁷ The question before us is to determine whether metaphor theories can help to confirm, clarify, or contradict arguments made by others working in empire studies, and the worked example of Ephesians 6:10–20 will provide a framework for using contemporary metaphor theories to assess whether other New Testament metaphors should be classed as anti-imperial. The chapter will conclude with an assessment of the strengths and limitations of modern metaphor theories for determining whether a New Testament metaphor is anti-imperial.

Interest in metaphors and their properties and functions is not a modern phenomenon. Ancient rhetoricians developed sets of instructions for how best to employ metaphors, and even the Enlightenment philosophers who argued that serious thinkers ought to eschew metaphorical representations,¹⁸ nevertheless (and perhaps unintentionally) employed sophisticated and persuasive metaphors in their own political and philosophical treatises.¹⁹ Modern metaphor theories all affirm that metaphor is indispensable to human communication and, as cognitive linguists argue, to human cognition.²⁰ There is a discernible turn in modern metaphor studies from what might be termed philosophical and aesthetic approaches to cognitive approaches, and cognitive approaches have dominated the academic conversation for some time now.²¹ However, contemporary research on metaphors is not limited to cognitive linguistics, though it is certainly now true that the work of cognitive linguists on metaphors has in-

¹⁶ E.g., Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire*; Frederick J. Long, “Ephesians: Paul’s Political Theology in Greco-Roman Political Context,” in *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, and Andrew Pitts (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 255–309; Nijay K. Gupta and Frederick J. Long, “The Politics of Ephesians and the Empire: Accommodation or Resistance?,” *JGRChJ* 7 (2010): 112–36. See also Te-Li Lau, who reads Ephesians 6:10–20 as a political metaphor but who does not see the metaphor as explicitly anti-imperial (*The Politics of Peace Ephesians, Dio Chrysostom, and the Confucian Four Books* [Leiden: Brill, 2010], 145–53).

¹⁷ E.g., Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 25–27; Richard Horsley, “Paul’s Counter-Imperial Gospel: Introduction,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard Horsley (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1997), 142–43.

¹⁸ In somewhat delicious and certainly sensual irony, John Locke continues by saying that serious thinkers should prefer “true ideas”: arguments that are “stripped” of superfluous ideas, and “laid naked” “in which position ‘the mind, taking a view of them, sees the connexion they have’” (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [Kitchener, ON: Batoche, 2001], 564–65).

¹⁹ See especially Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024); see also Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

²⁰ For an introduction to this research see Gibbs, *Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*; see also George Lakoff, and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

²¹ This “cognitive turn” is traceable in the three Cambridge Handbooks referenced in n. 1. Cognitive approaches are absent from the first Cambridge Handbook (Ortony, 1979), are only present in the final section of the second Handbook (Ortony, 1993), and in the third Handbook cognitive approaches are adopted throughout (Gibbs, 2008).

fluenced studies on metaphor a wide array of fields such as science,²² sociology,²³ political science,²⁴ anthropology,²⁵ philosophy,²⁶ and literature.²⁷

In my own work on interpreting New Testament metaphors, I have found the insights of conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) most helpful in regard to thinking through what metaphors *do*. Insights from cognitive linguistics are especially useful for thinking through why people find metaphors persuasive, and why metaphors can evoke powerful feelings and shape the attitudes and identity of both individuals and groups. CMT also raises important hermeneutical questions regarding the locus of meaning. When we classify a metaphor as “anti-imperial,” does this meaning lie in the text itself, does it lie in the mind of the author, or does it lie in the mind of the readers/auditors? This instability that is arguably inherent in metaphor, as I will show below, makes it difficult to definitively categorize most metaphors as “anti-imperial” or not. However, the questions and tools contemporary theories of metaphor bring to the interpretation of NT metaphors does bring clarity and precision to why various audiences, including the earliest audiences of biblical texts, may have found certain texts useful in their struggles against empire.

²² See, e.g. Theodore L. Brown, *Making Truth: Metaphor in Science* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Andrew Pinsent, “Image, Metaphor, and Understanding in Science and Theology,” in *Issues in Science and Theology: Creative Pluralism? Images and Models in Science and Religion*, ed. Michael Fuller, Gernot Dirk Evers, and Anne Runehov (Cham: Springer, 2022), 11–21; See also the section, “Metaphor: Moving Targets in the (Social) Sciences,” in *Science Studies Probing the Dynamics of Scientific Knowledge*, ed. by Sabine Maasen and Matthias Winterhager (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015), 213–34.

²³ For an approachable introduction see Richard Swedberg, *The Art of Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 80–97; see also the insightful collection of essays in Andrea Lombardini, ed. *The Lure of Communication: Sociology through Rhetoric* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2024).

²⁴ See, e.g., Terrell Carver, and Jernej Pikalo, eds., *Political Language and Metaphor: Interpreting and Changing the World* (New York: Routledge, 2008); George Lakoff, and Elisabeth Wehling, *Your Brain’s Politics: How the Science of Mind Explains the Political Divide* (Exeter: Societas, 2016); Othman Khalid Al-Shboul, *The Politics of Climate Change Metaphors in the U.S. Discourse: Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Analysis from an Ecolinguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis Perspective* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023).

²⁵ See e.g., Marcel Danesi, *Linguistic Relativity Today: Language, Mind, Society, and the Foundations of Linguistic Anthropology* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Matthias Brenzinger, and Iwona Kraska, eds., *The Body in Language: Comparative Studies of Linguistic Embodiment*, Brill’s Studies in Language, Cognition and Culture 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

²⁶ See especially Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*; see also Ning Yu, *The Moral Metaphor System: A Conceptual Metaphor Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

²⁷ See, e.g., George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Antonio Barcelona, ed., *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads: A Cognitive Perspective* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2003)

1 Contemporary Theories of Metaphor: A Brief Overview

1.1 Key Terms and Definitions in Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual metaphor theory typically defines metaphor as thinking of one “domain of experience” (usually abstract) in terms of another (usually concrete).²⁸ For CMT, as Kövecses explains, a metaphor is thus both “a process and a product.”²⁹ Kövecses puts forth a more precise definition of a conceptual metaphor: “A conceptual metaphor is a systematic set of correspondences between two domains of experience.”³⁰ CMT researchers further refer to the cognitive process of thinking of one domain of experience in terms of another as “mapping.” However, Giles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s research argued that it is not sufficient to think of metaphors as “mapping” the content of one domain onto another, but instead we should think of metaphors in terms of “conceptual blending.” Fauconnier and Turner define conceptual blending as the mind’s process of selecting material from one or more mental input space into a new *blended* mental space.³¹ This blended space *compresses* the content from the two input spaces and results in new emergent structures that are not present in the original input spaces.³² Significantly for CMT, metaphors are located in *thinking* (cognition) rather than being a property of language or texts. Thus CMT is focused on questions of cognition and meaning rather than on the interpretation of words in texts, and CMT likewise tends to locate meaning in the mind rather than thinking of meaning as located in the text itself.

One central tenet of CMT is that root conceptual metaphors, particularly metaphors that map emotions and other body-based processes such as **HAPPY IS UP**, **CENTRAL IS IMPORTANT**, **ARGUMENT IS WAR**, **ANGER IS FIRE**, and **EMOTIONAL CLOSENESS IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS** are pervasive in human speech and cognition. Furthermore, root conceptual metaphors also show a high degree of correspondence between cultures, which suggests to most cognitive linguists that these root metaphors have some common genetic or biological basis.³³ According to CMT, root conceptual metaphors are extra-linguistic, but they also are evident in the unifying conceptual frameworks that underlie related constel-

²⁸ Zoltán Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.

²⁹ Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor*, 1.

³⁰ Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor*, 3.

³¹ Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 35–50.

³² See the full discussion of blending and compression in Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 39–58, 113–38; see also George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

³³ See Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

lations of linguistic metaphors, such as “she has an added bounce in her step,” “he is walking on air,” or “here’s a little something to lift your spirits” (HAPPY IS UP). Conceptual metaphors are so fundamental to our cognitive processes and patterns that they often go undetected, but they are nevertheless powerful forces that shape a person’s perceptions, emotions, and behaviours. Although CMT is primarily focused on conceptual metaphors (in cognition), CMT researchers also recognise that there is a close relationship between conceptual metaphors and linguistic metaphors,³⁴ and so it is possible to analyse linguistic metaphors with an eye to identifying the root conceptual metaphors that underlie them.

Many of the linguistic metaphors in the New Testament, including the test case I will discuss below (Eph 6:10–20, LIFE IS WAR), quite evidently draw upon common root conceptual metaphors, and it is helpful for interpreters to notice them insofar as it enables the interpreter to discuss the metaphor’s affective and cognitive impact in greater detail and specificity. Because conceptual metaphors both reveal and shape patterns of thinking, linguistic metaphors that draw upon common conceptual metaphors are also more likely to contain anti-imperial sentiments and attitudes than “unrooted,” novel linguistic metaphors. Thus the presence of a root conceptual metaphor is possibly a good indication of a linguistic metaphor’s potential for shaping anti-imperial attitudes and behaviours among its readers/auditors. In addition, there are a few key identifiable conceptual metaphors at work in most *political* discourse including: FAMILY, BODY, WAR, PARASITE/POLLUTANT, and PERSON.³⁵ However, in order to assess whether an NT metaphor has anti-imperial content, one must go beyond identifying the mere presence of a root conceptual metaphor and consider also the context of the discourse as a whole and any culturally embedded cues in the text that might condition or engender an anti-imperial attitude or response.³⁶

One potential limitation of CMT for analysing NT metaphors for anti-imperial content is that researchers in CMT have not always been attuned to the cultural and context-specific ways in which conceptual metaphors are interpreted when they are embedded in discourses. Instead, CMT researchers are typically more concerned to identify and explain the “mechanics” of a metaphor through identifying the conceptual metaphor(s) operating beneath the surface of language use.³⁷ As a result, CMT researchers are comparatively less interested

³⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 3–9; 56–60.

³⁵ All of these occur in texts of the NT. See, e.g., the kinship language for fellow believers as siblings/sons/children (e.g., Acts 15:22–23; Rom 8:12–31; Gal 4:1–7; Rev 12:10; John 1:12–13; 1 John 3:2); the body metaphor for the church (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12; Eph 5:23–32; Col 1:18); the Christian life as spiritual battle (e.g., Rom 6:13, 13:12–14; Gal 2:4, 5:16–18; Eph 6:10–20); Sin and death as pollutant (e.g., Matt 5:22–23; Rom 5:12; 7:7–20); gossip as pollutant (2 Tim 2:17); and various nations as persons (e.g., Rom 10:19–21; Rev 17–18).

³⁶ Musolff, *Political Metaphor*, 129.

³⁷ See e.g., Kövecses detailed discussion of levels of metaphor analysis (*Extended Conceptual Metaphor*, 50–92).

in questions of what metaphors can *do* as a mode of communication.³⁸ Yet questions of what metaphors *do* are important for discerning whether a New Testament metaphor is anti-imperial *in se*, or, if using the locus of meaning suggested by CMT, if an NT metaphor is likely to engender anti-imperial attitudes and behaviours. To answer these questions it is not enough to merely identify the root conceptual metaphors that give rise to the linguistic metaphors we find in the NT texts. We must also consider questions of how metaphors shape attitudes, emotions, perceptions, and behaviours, and for these questions we must turn to other research in cognitive linguistics on language and meaning.

Taking our example of a political NT metaphor that is more obviously anti-imperial, the Whore of Babylon in Revelation 17 is a clear example of NATION AS PERSON. Musolff's analysis of various NATION AS PERSON metaphors shows these metaphors are powerful means of building and performing collective identity when they occur in emphatic political discourses.³⁹ The rhetorical power of a NATION AS PERSON metaphor is determined by "scenarios [in which] it appears and which conclusions/solutions it is supposed to make seem plausible." In the case of Revelation 17, the scenario of Rome/Babylon as Whore, which is a highly stylised NATION AS PERSON metaphor, suggests clear associations to the readers/hearers. A Whore is not an honourable woman, her body is used for sexual gratification (etc.), and therefore the scenario presented in the text of Revelation 17 makes her destruction by the kings of the earth feel justified and plausible. Thus Revelation 17 is an instantiation of Musolff's conclusion that "conceptual metaphors become politically effective if and when they are integrated into seemingly plausible scenarios with ... an argumentative and evaluative default bias."⁴⁰

One additional point of definitional clarity: as is the case in Revelation 17 which draws on the conceptual metaphor NATION AS PERSON to present Rome/Babylon as a Whore, there is typically a close connection between a conceptual metaphor and a discrete instance of a linguistic metaphor that is expressed in a text or in speech. However, so as not to confuse conceptual and linguistic metaphors it is helpful to supplement CMT's definition of metaphor with a definition that is well-suited to the analysis of texts, which provides clarity and precision in pinpointing a textual metaphor and pays closer attention to the dis-

³⁸ Some cognitive linguists are very interested in questions of how things mean and how language affects perception, identity, and behaviours and treat these questions in their publications in areas of philosophy or political science (see especially Lakoff and Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh*, and Lakoff and Wehling's, *Your Brain's Politics*), but these questions are not as prominent in CMT publications dedicated to the "mechanics" of metaphor.

³⁹ Musolff (*Political Metaphor*, 93–113) analyses speeches of Netanyahu and Abbas to make this point, and contrasts these speeches with weak conceptualisations in news sources (e.g., "I extend my hand – the hand of Israel – in peace," vs. "America launched submarines").

⁴⁰ Musolff, *Political Metaphor*, 112.

course that shapes and constrains that metaphor's meaning. Janet M. Soskice's definition of metaphor as "that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another thing"⁴¹ is obviously quite close to the definition CMT offers. However, unlike CMT's definition, Soskice's definition locates metaphors in discrete linguistic utterances rather than in the thoughts of the metaphor-maker or the metaphor's hearers. This, I would suggest, is a helpful distinction for an analysis of texts, and for appreciating that textual metaphors may evoke different responses (perceptions, emotions, or behaviours) from different readers/auditors. With Soskice's definition then, it is possible to distinguish between the textual metaphor (which is located in the text), the root conceptual metaphor (which the text draws upon and activates), and the meaning of the metaphor (which for CMT is produced by the mind of the reader/auditor).

1.2 Metaphor and Embodied Simulation

As seen in the discussion above, researchers in cognitive linguistics are, broadly speaking, interested in how minds make meaning. Some CMT researchers have sought to discover the root conceptual metaphors that undergird human cognition,⁴² and others have focused energy on discovering what a mind actually does to make sense of a linguistic utterance. According to one group of cognitive linguists, a primary way that minds make meaning is by running embodied simulations of the sentences we speak, hear, or read.⁴³ Although this sounds technical, it is intuitively understandable with a few simple examples.

Take, for instance, the sentence "Open your front door." The sentence "open your front door" likely has caused you to run an embodied simulation in your mind of whatever process you need to open the door, which possibly includes things like what your key looks like, which way the key turns in the lock, what direction the knob or handle turns, what colour your door is, what sound it makes, and so forth. Cognitive linguists argue that these simulations that your mind runs are "the meaning" of the sentence "open your front door." Significantly for our analysis, cognitive linguists increasingly do not think that people determine meaning by decoding or disambiguating the senses of individual words. Rather, the whole of a sentence causes the mind to run simulations of the sentence that engage the body's sensory systems (visual, auditory, olfactory, and so forth).

To take another example of how our minds run simulations, if someone sitting in a noisy restaurant were to exclaim, "it's so loud I can't hear myself think," that is, in fact a highly accurate statement about what is likely happening in the per-

⁴¹ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 15.

⁴² See especially Kövecses, *Metaphor and Culture*, Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

⁴³ For an entertaining and approachable overview of this research see Benjamin Bergen, *Louder Than Words: The New Science of How the Mind Makes Meaning* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

son's mind. The external noise is so loud and distracting that the person cannot engage her auditory system to listen to her own internal monologue. In contrast, when the same person is lost in a book she is unable to hear what is going on around her because her auditory system is already engaged in listening to herself reading.⁴⁴ While some have cast doubt on the explanatory power of embodied simulation for abstract language,⁴⁵ a substantial amount of empirical research has shown that concrete and sensate language evokes embodied simulations for language users.⁴⁶ Since metaphors are most often used to make abstract things concrete by putting them in sensate terms, embodied simulation is not only likely to occur, it is likely the reason that metaphors are so powerful and persuasive – they make meaning by creating mental experiences for their readers/auditors.

Returning again to the example from Revelation above, the text's extended metaphor speaks of Rome in term suggestive of both Babylon and of a Whore:

The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire.... The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth. (Rev 17:15–18, NRSV).

Drawing on the root conceptual metaphor NATION AS PERSON, this text has a number of identifiable textual metaphors, some of which are in an X is Y construction (the waters that you saw ... are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages,” “the woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth”) and others where X is unstated in the text but must be assumed by the auditor/reader (“they will make her desolate and naked”; “they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire”). Interpreters of Revelation 17 have long found this text's imagery troubling and unsettling, and CMT perhaps gives an interpreter a set of explanatory tools for why and how this text troubles and unsettles.

Research in CMT suggests that the “meaning” of Revelation 17 for the auditor/reader lies in the mind's simulation of the woman and her violent demise and violation at the hands of the rulers and kings of the earth. Through an encounter

⁴⁴ Our minds engage more than one system when reading, so not only are we listening to ourselves read, but we also are running visual simulations (and olfactory, tactile, etc.) of what we are reading. Further, some people seem to engage more with their sense of sight and others with their sense of hearing in running simulations, so a noisy environment is more likely to affect an auditory processor and a visual processor is more likely to have their mental simulations interfere with visual tasks such as driving (see Bergen, *Louder Than Words*, 13–22, for a summary of this research).

⁴⁵ See the discussion of the weaknesses of embodied simulation in regard to abstract language in Benjamin Bergen, “Embodiment, Simulation, and Meaning,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Semantics*, ed. Nick Reimer (New York: Routledge, 2016), 149–52.

⁴⁶ For a helpful introduction to cognitive linguistics with chapters on various aspects of embodied simulation see Barbara, Dancygier, ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

with the text, the reader sees, hears, feels (and even possibly smells) the woman's burnt and naked body, and feels viscerally the hate and violence that the kings of the earth inflict upon her. The ability of metaphors to create vivid mental simulations for readers is thus an important property to consider in the interpretation of the metaphor. In the case of Revelation 17, the embodied simulation evoked by the metaphor muddies the sharp dichotomy between woman and city that some interpreters insist upon in order to minimise the problematic violence toward a sex worker present in the text's depiction of Rome's destruction.⁴⁷ Instead, it is precisely the vividness of the metaphor that makes the depiction of Rome's destruction perversely satisfying yet also troubling for the hearer/auditor. Rome, the licentious and lascivious Whore of Revelation 17, the same one who has exploited and persecuted the saints, is not only shameful and even pornographic, she meets her utter demise at the hands of the rulers of the world and at the behest of God – at least in the mind's eye of the auditors/readers.⁴⁸

1.3 Metaphor and Background

That minds make meaning of language via embodied simulation ought to cause exegetes to rethink, or at least clarify, questions of a metaphor's "background."⁴⁹ If minds make meaning via embodied simulation, then the scripts/simulations that each reader/auditor run are surely influenced and constrained by their cultural context. However, as many linguists have argued, we ought to think of this process less in terms of isolating a particular facet (be that isolating a particular precursor text or positing a specific definition of a key word), and more in terms of a metaphor drawing upon an encyclopaedia of words, images, and experiences

⁴⁷ This insistence that the figurative depiction of a city need not be "literally" troubling for flesh-and-blood women is at the heart of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's reading of Revelation 17–18 (*The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, 2nd ed. [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1998]; see also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991]); for a critique of Schüssler Fiorenza's reading, see Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

⁴⁸ Lynn Huber's queer lesbian reading of Revelation 17 catches these dynamics well. Huber writes, "in my viewing there is both an experience of distance that wants closeness with the Whore, the experience of a desiring spectator, and a certain sense of closeness that ultimately wants some distance from the Whore because of a forced recognition of shared vulnerability" ("Gazing at the Whore: Reading Revelation Queerly," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Readings at the Boundary of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. by Lynn R. Huber, Teresa J. Hornsby, and Ken Stone (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011), 314).

⁴⁹ Many studies of New Testament metaphors are thorough investigation into a metaphor's possible "background." However, contemporary theories of metaphor cast doubt on whether identification of a metaphor's background (or backgrounds) is sufficient for understanding its meaning in a given text. For a fuller discussion of this hermeneutical issue see Erin M. Heim, *Adoption in Galatians and Romans: Contemporary Metaphor Theories and the Pauline Hui-thesia Metaphors*, BibInt 153 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 112–48.

as the mind runs the embodied simulation.⁵⁰ What is activated or evoked in a mind's particular simulation is further constrained by the metaphor's literary context, and we must also recognise that individual readers/auditors will have at least minor differences in their cultural encyclopaedias, and therefore will have differences in their simulations.⁵¹

It is thus not possible to speak absolutely of a single "background" for a metaphor to the exclusion of other possible backgrounds. Instead, embodied simulation necessitates that exegetes speak of backgrounds that are more or less salient or probable. Taking again our example above, the two metaphors "Rome is Babylon" and "Babylon is a Whore" each potentially conjure a range of images, sensations, sounds, smells, or experiences for the readers/auditors. For Jewish-Christian readers, the equation of Rome with Babylon and then Babylon with a Whore likely evoked a rich tapestry of associations with various Old Testament texts. Old Testament texts that portray Babylon as the age-old oppressor and enemy of God's people were almost surely activated (e.g., 2 Kgs 25; Psalm 137; Isa 13–14; Mic 4:10). Indeed, some of Revelation 17's wording is a fairly direct allusion to just these texts (comp. Isaiah 29:1 and Rev 18:2). Further, the imagery of Babylon's judgment in Revelation 17 perhaps especially activated those prophetic texts that denounce Babylon for her wickedness, idolatry, and immorality, such as Isaiah 47:1–3:

⁵⁰ See discussion in Bergen, *Louder Than Words*, 6–9; 223–46.

⁵¹ Cognitive linguists and biblical scholars working explicitly with a blending framework separate out the possible associations into various mental input spaces and map them into conceptual blends. Heuristically, this brings clarity to the question, but the visual presentation of the input spaces and resulting blended space risks oversimplifying or mischaracterizing a complex neurobiological process whereby the mind makes meaning of language. Biblical scholars working with conceptual blending thus ought to be aware of critical voices in cognitive linguistics who observe, "The claim by Fauconnier and Turner that mental spaces are human cognition at work still fails to be supported by definitions and empirical investigations which concern themselves with what mental spaces really are" (Anders Hougaard, and Todd Oakley, "Introduction: Mental Spaces and Discourse Analysis," in *Mental Spaces in Discourse and Interaction*, ed. Todd Oakley and Anders Hougaard [Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008], 12); see also the nuanced critique by Raymond Gibbs Jr., "Making Good Psychology Out of Blending Theory," *Cognitive Linguistics* 11 (2000): 347–58. Nevertheless, the heuristic clarity provided by diagrams of input spaces and resulting conceptual blends can be helpful in exegesis. For good examples of cognitive blending applied to the NT and Early Christian texts see Beth M. Stovell, *Mapping Metaphorical Discourse in the Fourth Gospel: John's Eternal King* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Laura J. Hunt, "Alien and Degenerate Milk: Embodiment, Mapping, and Social Identity in Four Nursing Metaphors," *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies* 4 (2022): 119–56; Vernon K. Robbins, "Conceptual Blending and Early Christian Imagination," in *Explaining Christian Origins and Early Judaism*, ed. Petri Luomanen, Risto Uro, and Ilkka Pyysiäinen (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 161–95. Few have employed cognitive blending as a hermeneutical framework specifically in the interest of determining the anti-imperial content of a text, though see Laura J. Hunt, "Cognitive Blending Approach to Polemic in John 18:38–19:37" (Paper presentation, Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Diego, November 2024).

Come down and sit in the dust,
virgin daughter Babylon!
 Sit on the ground without a throne,
daughter Chaldea!
 For you shall no more be called
tender and delicate.
 Take the millstones and grind meal,
remove your veil,
strip off your robe, uncover your legs,
pass through the rivers.
Your nakedness shall be uncovered,
and your shame shall be seen.
 I will take vengeance,
 and I will spare no one.

As in Revelation 17, Isaiah 47 shows the humiliation and defeat of Babylon, though in Isaiah 47 Babylon's humiliation is even more directly carried out by YHWH (comp. Rev 17:17 “until the words of God will be fulfilled”). When taken together, the OT texts that surely constituted a significant portion of the encyclopaedia for “Rome is Babylon” evoke a complex vision of a powerful and wealthy empire (Babylon) that was responsible for immense and generational suffering (e.g., Psalm 137; Jer 25:9–12), for Israel’s displacement from their ancestral homeland and patterns of life and worship (e.g., Jer 34:1–3; Dan 1:8–18), and against whom God promised to bring his hand of judgment in order to vindicate his people (e.g., Isa 13:19; Isa 14:1–22; Jer 42:11). For those auditors/readers who were steeped in the Scriptures of Israel, the many texts that catalogue Israel’s dealings with her powerful and idolatrous neighbour would have formed a powerful mental association of Rome as the latest iteration/reincarnation of an age-old oppressor of God’s people.

However, as important as these OT texts are for interpreting the symbolic imagery of Revelation 17, they are not exhaustive, nor can we be certain that non-Jewish hearers/readers of Revelation would have had access to these, or indeed if they did have access that they would have experienced the associations between Rome and Babylon as viscerally as their Jewish counterparts. For non-Jewish hearers, the experience of Rome as a Whore rather than as the virtuous Roma, a female deity who embodied Roman virtue, piety, and chastity might have played a more prominent role in the embodied simulations.⁵² The author of Revelation 17 also seems to assume that the audience(s) of the book have experienced persecution and oppression of various forms at the hands of Rome, or at very least would have been familiar with some of Rome’s brutal and exploitative practices (Rev 17:6, 18:1–19:24). Finally, there was likely a range of experiences

⁵² For a thorough discussion of Rev 17:1–18 as an *ekphrasis* see David Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 919–28; see too, for example, the depictions of Rome in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (5.600–601; 6.781–787)

with sex work and attitudes toward sex workers among the auditors/readers of Revelation 17, and these experiences formulate and fill out the simulation of Babylon/Rome as Whore.⁵³ For the first audience, the metaphor's meaning is thus tied to a particular cultural context and particular cultural expressions and experiences, but "meaning" it is not identical to "background," and instead is forged in the complex interplay of the images, sensations, sounds, smells, and experiences that the mind creates as the readers/auditors encounter the metaphor.

1.4 The Social Function of Metaphors

Metaphors, especially political metaphors, are not neutral conduits of information, but rather they shape perception, influence emotion, and aid in the formation of both individual and group identity. These capacities mean that metaphors often serve an analysable social function, particularly those metaphors that appear in political rhetoric and propaganda where the intent is to persuade the audience to see *X* in a certain light, which Ted Cohen calls a "sameness of vision."⁵⁴

Taking again the metaphors of Revelation 17, the social aspects of metaphor are easily identifiable. The text's portrayal of Rome as Babylon and Rome/Babylon as Whore highlights those aspects of Rome's exploitative behaviour for the audience. The metaphor frames their experience of Roman persecution and exploitation as an experience of the exile/destruction of Israel by Babylon, which highlights both their continuity with the people of God, and the continuity of God's action in preserving his people and in judging the unrighteousness of their enemies. Furthermore, Rome/Babylon as Whore frames the Roman empire's persecution, idolatry, and exploitation not only as wicked, but also as shameful and sexually immoral.

The metaphor draws upon the well-worn trope of woman as city (and NATION AS PERSON), and depicting Rome as a Whore works doubly to subvert Roman claims to the empire's piety and chastity (figured as Roma), and also to subvert the Roman ideals of masculinity.⁵⁵ The violent overthrow of Rome in Revelation 17 is not described as a battle against a formidable masculine soldier, but as the violation of a dishonourable woman. The metaphor makes clear to the readers/hearers that there is no dignity for Rome in her defeat. She is a wicked, fearsome,

⁵³ For an insightful take on the connection between Rome's depiction as a Whore and the experiences of real women as sex workers see Michelle Fletcher, "The Whore of Babylon," in *The Visual Commentary on Scripture*, ed. Ben Quash. <https://thevcs.org/whore-babylon> (accessed 25 March, 2025).

⁵⁴ On "sameness of vision" see Ted Cohen, *Thinking of Others: On the Talent for Metaphor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 22–23.

⁵⁵ Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 134–44; see also Stephen D. Moore, and Janice Capel Anderson, eds., *New Testament Masculinities* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2003).

and immoral woman, and according to ancient norms of femininity and sexuality, the Whore receives her just punishment.⁵⁶ This metaphorical depiction of Rome, of course, is highly stylised, and it picks out and highlights those facets of the Roman Empire that the author and audience experience negatively. It likewise hides or negatively frames any of Rome's beneficial qualities, such as its prosperity, wealth, or other things that the audience may have found socially desirable.⁵⁷ Furthermore, a metaphor's rhetorical power lies not only in its ability to shape the thinking of the audience, but indeed to evoke particular emotional responses from its hearers/readers. In the case of Babylon/Rome as Whore, the Whore and her destruction likely evokes a sense of revulsion or indeed perverse fascination, but also likely engendered a sense of satisfaction at the woman's shame and violation. Again, according to ancient gender norms, she "gets what was coming to her."

Because political metaphors are powerful rhetorical tools for framing a subject in a particular way, they are especially useful for forming group identity and shaping group values, attitudes and behaviours by creating a "sameness of vision."⁵⁸ For the early Christian audience of Revelation, the metaphors of Revelation 17 create a shared understanding of the Roman Empire as Babylon and as a Whore. This "sameness of vision" cultivates an "in-group" who participates in a shared understanding of X (i.e., the Roman Empire), and conversely, the metaphor functions to exclude those hearers/readers who fail to understand Rome, or refuse to view Rome, through the metaphor's negative lenses (Babylon and Whore). Furthermore, the "sameness of vision" cultivates intimacy and social connection between in-group members as they participate in the vision cast by the metaphor.⁵⁹ In the case of strong political metaphors, the power of the metaphor leads to a strong sense of in-group identity, and politicians and leaders can and do leverage group identity in order to achieve their own/their group's political aims. In many cases, the political attitudes and actions of a group are predictable based on the metaphors that are most prominent in the group's language use, and this is unsurprising given the research in CMT and related fields that show how metaphors work to shape attitudes and actions.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ By pointing out how the metaphor in Revelation 17 works I am by no means endorsing the violent rhetoric the text uses, which, as noted above, various feminist scholars have rightly identified as problematic.

⁵⁷ See the discussion of a metaphor's capacity to highlight and hide in Heim, *Adoption*, 83–89.

⁵⁸ Cohen, *Thinking of Others*, 22.

⁵⁹ Ted Cohen, "Some Philosophy: 1," *Raritan* 10.2 (1990): 30

⁶⁰ Musolff, *Political Metaphor*, 134–39; This is not to say that the interpreters or users of metaphor accept the entailments of a metaphor blindly. Musolff argues persuasively that metaphor users are at least somewhat deliberate in their selection of language (*pace* Lakoff, Johnson, Gibbs, and other CMT researchers), and so should be held accountable for their language and actions (*Political Metaphor*, 88–92).

2 A Worked Example: The Armour of God (Eph 6:10–20)

In order to assess the utility of CMT and other contemporary theories of metaphor for analysing the extent to which a particular NT metaphor is anti-imperial or fostered anti-imperial attitudes or behaviours, it is helpful to take a worked example where the anti-imperial content is more ambiguous to show how this mode of analysis might aid in answering this question. By examining the historical-cultural and literary context of the example, I will probe questions of whether the root metaphor is identifiably anti-imperial, whether the metaphor is likely to have elicited embodied simulations that might be classed “anti-imperial,” whether the metaphor is likely to have cultivated an anti-imperial sameness of vision, and whether there is any evidence in the reception of the metaphor that the early readers/hearers understood the metaphor as anti-imperial. I have deliberately chosen an NT metaphor that has sometimes been read as anti-imperial, but is less straightforwardly so than the anti-imperial metaphors of Revelation 17 examined above: the armour of God metaphor in Ephesians 6:10–20.

One of the difficulties in analysing any portion of Ephesians for anti-imperial content is the lack of evidence that we have for the letter’s setting, date, authorship, and audience.⁶¹ Pauline scholars are fairly evenly split as to whether Paul wrote this letter, and if he did write it, where he was imprisoned when the letter was sent. Some ancient manuscripts lack the address “in Ephesus,”⁶² and the letter also lacks Paul’s characteristic final greeting. Thus it is difficult to discern anything specific about the audience from the letter itself, and this likewise poses some challenges for using metaphor theory to assess the anti-imperial content of the metaphors in the letter since the cultural encyclopaedia of the hearers/readers can only be sketched in a general sense. Moreover, and helpfully for the purpose of assessing the utility of metaphor theory for identifying anti-imperial content in the New Testament, scholars disagree about whether Ephesians is best understood through the lens of anti-imperial resistance,⁶³ or if, as Neil Elliott claims, the theology of Ephesians is “inherently liable to an otherworldly spirit-

⁶¹ The ambivalence of Pauline scholars toward Ephesians probably accounts in part for the lacuna of scholarship on Ephesus in New Testament Studies. Paul Trebilco’s work on Ephesus is a notable exception, but he laments “the broader picture of the life of the early Christians in Ephesus has not been given the prominence it deserves” (*The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 2). However, Trebilco also does not link Ephesians to Ephesus in his own work, due to the letter’s lack of specific historical and geographical content.

⁶² Manuscripts \mathfrak{P}^{46} κ^* B^* 6 and 1739 omit the phrase. It appears in the majority of manuscripts.

⁶³ Gupta and Long, “The Politics of Ephesians and the Empire,” 112–36; See also Margaret MacDonald’s argument that in Ephesians, Christian identity is conceived as a political identity distinct from Israel and from the Roman Empire (“The Politics of Identity in Ephesians,” *JSNT* 26 [2004]: 419–44).

ualization that distracts us from the web of this-worldly power relations” and thus is “a liability to the liberation of the church.”⁶⁴ The task in this section is therefore to assess whether metaphor theory contributes further clarity to this discussion.

2.1 Sketching the Background: The Eastern Roman Empire

I note that despite the limitations outlined in the previous paragraph, we can say some general things about the audience of Ephesians. First, although “in Ephesus” is lacking from some manuscripts, evidence from the early reception of the letter show that it is likely that the letter would have circulated in the region of Ephesus, possibly as an encyclical. Thus we can say that the letter’s audience was culturally of the eastern Roman Empire – a region that had practices and customs that were distinct from those in the western corners of the empire. Though there is not space here to detail the complex history of this region of Asia Minor, it is notable that empires through the centuries had vied over this region because of its access to the Aegean Sea, and by the first century it was firmly under Roman control. Roman control also brought the imperial cult to the region, and a number of cities (esp. Pergamum, Smyrna, and Ephesus) had embraced the imperial cult alongside their local/regional deities. This was particularly true in Ephesus where the imperial cult, founded as a provincial cult for Octavian’s reign in 29 BCE,⁶⁵ was embraced alongside worship of Artemis, eventually culminating in the city’s self-understanding as “twice νεωκόρος,”⁶⁶ which indicates that they thought of themselves as the caretakers of both the cult of Artemis and the cult of the Sebastes (i.e., the “cult of the emperors”).⁶⁷

The letter’s content also indicates that the author expected that there were gentiles in the audience (likely a majority, if not entirely gentile, see e.g., Eph 2:11), and that the author understood Christ as bringing down the dividing wall between Jews and gentiles (2:14).⁶⁸ It is clear from the letter that the author at least expects that the gentile audience would have had some familiarity with the Jewish Scriptures (Eph 2:11–21; 3:1–6; 4:8–12; 6:1–3), and if the letter was indeed sent to Ephesus, then there was a Jewish community of some size present in the city during the first century BCE and the first and second centuries CE.⁶⁹ It was

⁶⁴ Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 121. Elliott also labels Ephesians and Colossians “the oppressive face of canonical betrayal” (*Liberating Paul*, 25).

⁶⁵ Trebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus*, 30.

⁶⁶ Trebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus*, 29; for a thorough treatment of the imperial cult in Ephesus see Steven J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia, and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

⁶⁷ Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, 2–3.

⁶⁸ See MacDonald on the effect of this rhetoric on community identity and attitudes toward outsiders (“The Politics of Identity in Ephesians,” 424–28).

⁶⁹ See e.g., Trebilco’s discussion of the Jews of Ephesus requesting permission to administer their own finances in order to pay the Temple tax (*Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* [Cam-

not uncommon to find a group of pious gentiles attached to Jewish synagogues, though there was a spectrum of attachment that ranged from casual affiliation to proselyte conversion.⁷⁰

The letter's household codes in chapters 5 and 6 seem to presuppose that the audience contains men and women, parents and children, and enslaved persons and slave-owners, noting of course that audience members likely fell into more than one group.⁷¹ Scholars have long attempted to isolate the specific religious background of the audience, positing that the audience was likely influenced by the Artemis cult, or by Jewish mysticism, or by other pagan spiritual practices. However, there are obvious dangers in using mirror reading to reconstruct a letter's audience, and as such it is impossible to identify the audience's precise religious practices Paul warns against in his letter. The composite picture of the audience that emerges from the letter itself is a group of mainly gentile men and women of diverse ages, statuses, and social classes who were likely living in the environs of Ephesus, who would therefore have been enculturated into the religious, political, social, and economic landscape of life in that corner of the Roman Empire.

2.2 *The Armour Imagery: Greco-Roman and Jewish Inputs*

Moving beyond a general sketch of the audience and setting of Ephesians, CMT also necessitates that an interpreter undertake an analysis of the background and context of the imagery in the metaphor. In Ephesians 6:10–20, the root conceptual metaphor is straightforwardly *WAR*, though the ambiguity of the letter's setting means that it is not immediately clear if there is a specific anti-imperial scenario in view in the text (*POLITICS IS WAR*), or if the text should be categorised as a general moral exhortation underpinned by the root conceptual metaphor *LIFE IS WAR*.

In either case, there are two salient source domains for the scenario presented in Ephesians 6:10–20: the Divine Warrior of the Jewish Scriptures and armour and warfare in the Roman Empire, though we should not imagine these source domains work independently of each other. Jews living in the Roman Empire were undoubtedly familiar with the accoutrements of Roman warfare, and gentiles in the letter's audience were likely familiar with Israel's Scriptures (or at least the text of the letter assumes that they were).

bridge: Cambridge University Press 1991], 14–16; Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, a second century CE source, was also set in Ephesus (see discussion in Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 29–30).

⁷⁰ Paul Trebilco rightly cautions against using Ephesians as a source of information about early Christianity in Ephesus in a particular sense, but his work on Jewish communities in Asia Minor suggests that the pattern of Jew-Gentile relations assumed in Ephesians was present throughout cities in the eastern Roman Empire (*Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 145–66).

⁷¹ Margaret MacDonald, *The Power of Children: The Construction of Christian Families in the Greco-Roman World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 19–22.

The scenario of Ephesians 6:10–20 qualifies as an effective metaphor insofar as it suggests clear and specific actions and associations from the audience. The text of Ephesians 6:10–20 exhorts the audience to “put on the whole armour of God” (ἐνδύσασθε τὴν πανοπλίαν τοῦ θεοῦ), and then gives an additional command to “stand” by putting on individual parts of the armour:

1. Girding your waist/loins with truth (περιζωσάμενοι τὴν ὄσφυν ὑμῶν ἐν ἀληθείᾳ)

2. Putting on the breastplate of righteousness (ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν θώρακα τῆς δικαιοσύνης)

3. Shodding your feet in preparation for sharing the gospel of peace (ὑποδησάμενοι τοὺς πόδας ἐν ἐτομασίᾳ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου τῆς εἰρήνης)

4. Taking up the shield of faith (ἀναλαβόντες τὸν θυρεὸν τῆς πίστεως)

And at the end of the list they are given an additional command to take (δέξασθε):

1. The helmet of salvation (τὴν περικεφαλαίαν τοῦ σωτηρίου)

2. The sword of the Spirit (τὴν μάχαιραν τοῦ πνεύματος)

The imagery in the passage is vivid and distinctive, and CMT finds it significant that the text commands that the audience “suit up” for their spiritual battle, language which conjures a mental simulation of readying oneself for war by getting dressed in armour. The items that comprise the armour are recognisable parts of a Roman soldier’s kit, and the armour also has close parallels in the descriptions of the Yahweh’s anointed king and warrior in Isaiah 11 and 59.⁷² Lincoln rightly notes that while “ἐνδύσασθε τὴν πανοπλίαν” likely called to mind a Roman suit of armour for gentile readers, “the writer is not concerned with an accurate or detailed description of such armor.”⁷³ Nevertheless, a Roman suit of armour is the closest visual referent for the audience, and so CMT suggests that this is likely what would have formed the basis for the mental simulation.

Furthermore, though there can be no question of direct literary dependence, it is worth noting that other Greek and Roman authors drew upon military imagery in philosophical discourses, so the use of this imagery in Ephesians is not unique or novel. For example, Seneca and Epictetus both deploy similar imagery in their writings. Seneca writes,

And yet life, Lucilius, is *really a battle*. For this reason those who are tossed about at sea, who proceed uphill and downhill over toilsome crags and heights, who go on campaigns that bring the greatest danger, *are heroes and front-rank fighters*; but persons who live in rotten luxury and ease while others toil, are mere *turtle-doves*” (*Ep.* 96.5).⁷⁴

⁷² See the discussion in Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 436.

⁷³ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 436.

⁷⁴ Seneca, *Epistles* 93–124, vol. 3, LCL, trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), 107.

Similarly, Epictetus writes, “Do you not know that the business of life is a campaign? One man must mount guard, another go out on reconnaissance, and another out to fight” (*Diss* 3.24.31–32), and continues, “each man’s life is a kind of campaign, and a long and complicated one at that. You have to maintain the character of a soldier, and do each separate act at the bidding of the General, if possible divining what He wishes” (*Diss* 3.24.34–35).⁷⁵ For those conversant with CMT, the use of battle imagery in moral discourse is by no means surprising since ARGUMENT IS WAR and LIFE IS WAR are two root metaphors found across time and across cultures.⁷⁶

For audience members familiar with the Jewish Scriptures, the imagery of Ephesians 6:10–20 may have also called to mind texts like Isaiah 11:5 where YHWH’s anointed is clothed in a similar fashion, “Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.” Or it may have called to mind texts where YHWH himself puts on armour in order to execute judgment against the unrighteousness he sees, such as Isaiah 59:17, “He put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle.” It is interesting to note that these texts in Isaiah also are metaphorical; Isaiah’s audience is being asked to think of Yahweh’s judgment against injustice as a BATTLE, and thus if this text underlies Ephesians 6:10–20 the audience is actually using one metaphor to form the basis of another metaphor. However, in observing this I do not mean to suggest that there is anything more complicated or less immediate in the sensate experience Ephesians 6:10–20 creates for the readers/hearers. The mental simulations evoked by this metaphor are not made more abstract by layering the metaphors. If anything, envisioning themselves as putting on armour alongside the Divine Warrior of Isaiah results in a more emotional and compelling experience.

2.3 The Social and Emotive Content of the Armour of God

Turning then to the emotional and social function of Ephesians 6:10–20, we must first look to the immediate literary context in order to precisely identify the metaphor’s emotive content and intended social function. The audience is exhorted to “be strong in the Lord in the strength of his power” (ἐνδυναμοῦσθε ἐν κυρίῳ καὶ ἐν τῷ κράτει τῆς ἴσχύος αὐτοῦ), to “stand against the wiles of the devil” (πρὸς τὸ δύνασθαι ὑμᾶς στῆναι πρὸς τὰς μεθοδείας τοῦ διαβόλου), and to “keep alert” (εἰς αὐτὸ ἀγρυπνοῦντες) (6:18). Furthermore, they are to put on

⁷⁵ Epictetus, *Discourses Books 3–4, Fragments, the Encheiridion*, trans. W.A. Oldfather (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), 195.

⁷⁶ Kövecses, *Metaphor in Culture*, 71–86. Kövecses notes that while LIFE IS WAR is present in various cultures, different cultures show different levels of preference for conceptualising life as warfare/battle.

the armour so that they can withstand on that evil day (6:13). Paul also specifies that the enemy is not “flesh and blood,”⁷⁷ but rather they battle against “the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” These exhortations to stand against the dark spiritual forces perhaps evoked some feelings of fear, as a soldier might feel on the eve of a battle, yet the text pushes the readers ultimately to embrace a sense of steely resolve in the face of the enemies’ looming threat.⁷⁸

Strikingly, because these enemies are not flesh and blood, the text also presses the audience to identify the spiritual enemies they battle. This is a less straightforward task, as seen in the diverging opinions of various ancient and modern interpreters. Are these dark spiritual forces akin to the inward battle for self-mastery mentioned in various Stoic texts? Are these dark spiritual forces confronted by the community in prayer and in the pursuit of holiness? Or are these dark forces standing behind the real “flesh and blood” rulers who are oppressing the Christian community or enacting unjust and exploitative laws? Taking the context into consideration, it is striking that pervasiveness of the imperial cult in Asia Minor effectively blurs the lines between spiritual and political spheres, and thus a spiritual confrontation against rulers and authorities may well have also been a political confrontation in the minds of the readers/hearers of Ephesians.⁷⁹ CMT insists too that the emotions the text evokes are really experienced by the readers/hearers, and these emotions may well have influenced the ways in which members of the audience interacted with those who participated in worship of other deities, with people who engaged in other forms of idolatry or immorality, or with people who participated in the imperial cult. When these elements are considered together, the metaphor in Ephesians 6:10–20 functions to create a clear social boundary around the community (they are members of an army) and creates the perception that those who oppose the Christian community are enemy combatants in a spiritual battle.⁸⁰ However, it cannot be ruled out that for some audience members the spiritual battle waged “not against flesh and blood” was a battle against temptation and a battle for holiness. In either case,

⁷⁷ Gupta and Long argue that ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν ήμεν ή πάλιν πρὸς αἷμα καὶ σάρκα ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὰς ἀρχὰς is best understood as “not *merely* against flesh and blood,” but indeed also against evil human rulers (“The Politics of Ephesians and the Empire,” 124–25). As we will see below, early Christian readers of this passage found the image useful for all sorts of spiritual and physical enemies, often conflating the two.

⁷⁸ MacDonald notes that Ephesians 6:10–20 shares much in common with the speeches generals made before battles in other ancient sources (“The Politics of Identity in Ephesians,” 425).

⁷⁹ See Gupta and Long, “The Politics of Ephesians and the Empire,” 114–22.

⁸⁰ MacDonald argues similarly in her article, though she focuses less on Ephesians 6 (“The Politics of Identity in Ephesians,” 426–48). I also note that metaphor theory gives us language for articulating more precisely why the images of Ephesians 6 are effective means of creating a social boundary.

the audience is not called to violence but to faithful and righteous living, which is how they are to battle their enemies of any kind.⁸¹

Meaning and Anti-Imperial Content in Ephesians 6:10–20: The First-Century Context

The ambiguity of the metaphor's referent regarding the audience's "battle," and specifically for our task, whether this battle is anti-imperial, raises interesting questions for the interpreter about where precisely the "meaning" of the text resides. Is the metaphor's anti-imperial content a property of the text? Or a property of readings of the text? Or perhaps both? Because CMT locates meaning in the mind of the auditor/reader and not in the text itself, the ambiguity of the metaphor's referent in Eph 6:10–20 means that CMT cannot definitively answer the question of whether the text itself is anti-imperial. However, CMT can elucidate how and why the earliest readers of this text might have found it useful for anti-imperial resistance. The audience visualised themselves suiting up to do battle with the spiritual forces as they participate in the Divine Warrior. Their collective identity as soldiers in the Divine Warrior's army formed a shared experience and sameness of vision with others in their community, and this experience as a soldier likewise was accompanied by attendant emotions and attitudes. The text leaves undefined what precisely constitutes an enemy, and whether these enemies are imperial powers or if they are spiritual forces, but it is precisely this lack of specificity which would have allowed the audience to stretch the metaphor to fit a variety of situations. Some battles the audience fought might have been in resistance to the empire, but some instances of 'performing the Divine Warrior' might have been more mundane tasks, like instances resisting temptation. The very ambiguity of the metaphor perhaps made it well suited for its first audience(s) to deploy in battles of various kinds, some of which may have been anti-imperial.

3 Reception of the Armour of God: A Selective Account

One further way of testing whether the associations outlined above are plausible, and if plausible, whether they can be thought of as anti-imperial is to examine the reception history of the images/metaphors in the text. Ephesians 6:10–20 is one of the most often cited passages of the Pauline corpus in early Christian literature, and so it is well-suited for examining whether its metaphors provoked anti-imperial attitudes or actions in later audiences. In her examination of the reception history of Ephesians 6:10–20, Jennifer Strawbridge notes that the con-

⁸¹ See especially Timothy Gombis, *The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 155–80.

text of the earliest Christians “was saturated with military language and images and, at times, overshadowed by the threat of persecution,”⁸² and thus the images of warfare in Ephesians 6 are drawn from a recognisable cultural encyclopaedia that the earliest Christians made ready use of to encourage one another to endure hardships of various kinds, including persecution and martyrdom at the hands of the empire.

3.1 Early Anti-Imperial Reception of Ephesians 6:10–20

Martial and athletic imagery, though not always explicitly drawn from Ephesians 6:10–20, is a common feature in a number of texts that depict the martyrdom of early Christians. In his contemplation of whether Christians are to flee from persecution or to stand against it, Tertullian urges Christians to employ the weapons of Ephesians 6 in order to “stand steadfast,” and reasons further that Paul “points out weapons, too, which persons who intend to run away would not require” (*Fug. 9*).⁸³ We see similar imagery in other accounts of early martyrs. For example, Blandina was first suspended in the arena as though crucified, but

As none of the wild beasts at that time touched her, she was taken down from the stake, and cast again into prison. She was preserved thus for another contest, that, *being victorious in more conflicts*, she might make the punishment of the crooked serpent irrevocable; and, though small and weak and despised, *yet clothed with Christ the mighty and conquering Athlete*, she might arouse the zeal of the brethren, and, having *overcome the adversary many times might receive, through her conflict*, the crown incorruptible (Eusebius, *Church History* 5.1.41–42).⁸⁴

Likewise Perpetua’s account of martyrdom is framed as a contest not only in the arena (and thus against the empire) but ultimately as a battle against Satan. So she remarks, “I knew that I was going to fight with the devil and not with the beasts; but I knew that victory was to be mine” (*Pass. 4.10*).⁸⁵ In this battle she is confident of the victory and peace that she is assured in Christ, though she also recognises that her victory is synonymous with her martyrdom.

Origen makes a slightly different, though related, appeal to Ephesians 6:10–20 in his reply to Celsus regarding military service to the emperor. While on the surface Origen concedes that Christians have a duty to render military service to the empire, he insists “we do, when occasion requires, give help to kings, and

⁸² Jennifer R. Strawbridge, *The Pauline Effect: The Use of the Pauline Epistles by Early Christian Writers*, Studies of the Bible and Its Reception 5 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 59.

⁸³ Many of the texts I discuss in this section, including those by Tertullian, Origen, and Clement of Alexandria, are treated in much more depth in Strawbridge, *The Pauline Effect*, 57–96. For more detail, see her excellent analysis of key themes in the early reception of Ephesians 6:10–20.

⁸⁴ Emphasis mine.

⁸⁵ *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, trans. Thomas J. Heffernan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 130.

that, so to say, a divine help, putting on the whole armour of God ... And none fight better for the king than we do" (*Cels.* 8.73). However, Origen also insists that Christians cannot be pressed into rendering physical military service, saying "even when war is upon you, you never enlist the priests in the army ...[so too Christians fight by] keeping their hands pure, and wrestling in prayers to God on behalf of those who are fighting in a righteous cause, and for the king who reigns righteously" (*Cels.* 8.73). One might even detect a slight anti-imperial sentiment to Origen's final declaration of the paragraph: "We do not indeed fight under him, although he require it; but we fight on his behalf, forming a special army – an army of piety – by offering our prayers to God" (*Cels.* 8.73).

3.2 Early Reception of Ephesians 6:10–20 in Non-Anti-Imperial Contexts

However, Ephesians 6:10–20 also appears in numerous early Christian texts where anti-imperial resistance seems far from view. Clement of Alexandria envisages God assembling a "bloodless army" by the proclamation of the gospel. Fitted with the armour of God, this army of peace stands against the fiery darts of the enemy and fights with "moistened sword points ... dipped in water by the Word" (*Protr.* 11).⁸⁶ For Clement though, the soldiers' fight is in faithfulness to the gospel in order to serve and imitate God. Furthermore, in Clement's appropriation of Ephesians 6:10–20, there is no clear comparison or contrast with a specific earthly enemy or circumstance. Likewise in his commentary on Ephesians, Origen's exegesis of the armour of God frames the passage as a commendation of Christian virtue. Origen writes that to be strong in the Lord is to be strong "in reason and wisdom and the contemplation of the truth and in all the aspects of Christ," and to put on the armour of God is to put on Christ himself" (*Comm. Eph.* 6:11). For Origen, the one who has put on Christ "will, like a true soldier, cut down and destroy all opposing doctrines with the truth" (*Comm. Eph.* 6:11). Taking yet another tack, Tertullian reasons from Revelation 1:16; Ephesians 6:10–20, and Matthew 10:34 that Christ's fulfilment of the Divine Warrior of Isaiah and the Psalms is figurative. The sword of the Word is the sword of the Creator, and those who put on Paul's armour of God put on Christ himself (*Marc.* 3.14). These disparate examples show that while Christian authors in various times and places have found Ephesians 6:10–20 a useful text for encouraging Christians to stand firm against persecution and martyrdom, they also have found it useful for standing firm in less obviously anti-imperial battles.

3.3 Reception of Ephesians 6:10–20 in the Medieval and Reformation Periods

Interestingly, we might begin to detect a pattern in the reception of Ephesians 6:10–20 that correspond to the Church's relationship with governing author-

⁸⁶ Clement of Alexandria, trans. G. W. Butterworth, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard, 1919), 249.

ties. For example, in the writings from traditions who are more or less aligned with the governing authorities in their region, like Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, the armour of God metaphor is interpreted as putting on, for example, holiness, virtue, the gifts of the Spirit in order to resist the temptations and sins of the flesh. Aquinas writes, “we possess weapons to defend ourselves against carnal adversaries, namely, gluttony and sensuality, through temperance.”⁸⁷ Both Calvin and Luther are especially concerned to emphasise the importance of the word of God for every Christian in their spiritual battle against the devil. Luther writes, “every Christian should use this sword in hearing the Word, reading it, singing it, speaking it, and meditating upon it. For its power is such that wherever it is proclaimed in its truth and purity, wherever we learn it with diligence and sincerity, wherever we think upon it, there no Satan and no devil can abide.”⁸⁸ Similarly, in his commentary on Ephesians, Calvin writes “And what shall we say of those who take from a Christian people the word of God? Do they not rob them of the necessary armour, and leave them to perish without a struggle?”⁸⁹

On the other hand, the armour of God also features frequently in the writings of Christian groups, such as the Anabaptists, who are actively resisting persecution from the state, but in these contexts the focus is on the Christian equipping themselves with spiritual armour in order to remain faithful in the midst of persecution and martyrdom. The armour of God occurs frequently in the accounts of Anabaptist martyrs, often urging those in their family and community to continue to stand strong in the faith even after they have died. For example, Adrien Rogers exhorts his wife, “he that fears the Lord, with him it shall be well in the greatest trials. Therefore, my dear lamb, cleave to the Lord, and arm yourself; put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand, in the evil day.”⁹⁰ Anna of Rotterdam, on the morning of her execution, exhorted her son, Isaiah, to “contend for righteousness till death, gird on the armor of God.”⁹¹ So too Jerome Segers, who was martyred in Antwerp in 1551, writing to Henry the Great (another martyr) exhorts him,

My beloved brother in the Lord, be therefore undismayed; though they are mad and murmur against you, yet they can do you no harm. Let us contend manfully against all dragons and lions; take hold of the armor of God and the sword of the Spirit, and resist them, undaunted and undismayed; not fearing any man, they will soon take to flight;

⁸⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Matthew L. Lamb (Albany: Magi Books, 1966), 242.

⁸⁸ Martin Luther, WA 34 II:405.

⁸⁹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and to the Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1855), 339–40

⁹⁰ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre or The Martyrs' Mirror of the Defenceless Christians, Who Suffered and Were Put to Death for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Savior, from the Time of Christ Until the Year A.D. 1660*, trans. Daniel Rupp (Lampeter Square: David Miller, 1837), 867.

⁹¹ Van Braght, *Martyrs' Mirror*, 382.

for the sword given us by the Lord is too sharp for them, and the Lord being with us in the battle, who could well stand before him? For our God is a consuming fire, which devoureth his enemies.⁹²

Writing a few decades later, prior to his execution on 13 April 1589, Joost der Zoellner writes to his fellow believers in Ghent,

Therefore I counsel you, beloved brethren and sisters in the Lord, who now dwell in liberty, to rouse up quickly; it can easily happen that persecution may arise among you, as now in Flanders, for we have enjoyed this liberty already for seven years. Therefore, all the genuine soldiers of Christ should ever have themselves equipped with the weapons of righteousness, and put on the helmet of salvation and the breastplate of righteousness, having their loins girt about with the truth and with the sword of the spirit, nay, the shield of faith, wherewith they shall quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one.⁹³

Ephesians 6:10–20 in African American Reception History

The armour of God also features prominently in African American engagement with the Pauline texts. For example, John Jea, an enslaved African who was transported in the Middle Passage, preaches to his enslavers declaring, “there was nothing too hard for the Almighty God to do, for he would deliver me from their hands, and from their tyrannical power.... He armed me with the whole armour of divine grace, whereby I quenched all the fiery darts of the wicked [Eph. 6:16], and compelled Satan to retreat; and put him to flight by faithful and fervent prayer.”⁹⁴ So too Maria Stewart, drew upon the armour of God in her fiery farewell address delivered in Boston where Stewart was facing, as Lisa Bowens writes, “severe opposition” as “she preached and spoke out publicly against injustice.”⁹⁵ Stewart first reasons, “Did St. Paul but know of our wrongs and deprivations, I presume he would make no objection to our pleading in public for our rights,” and then describes her ministry as the “short period of my Christian warfare.”⁹⁶ She also encourages her audience to continue in the fight for justice and “be ye clothed with the breast-plate of righteousness, having your loins girt about you with truth.”⁹⁷

⁹² Van Braght, *Martyrs' Mirror*, 446.

⁹³ Van Braght, *Martyrs' Mirror*, 974.

⁹⁴ John Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, The African Preacher. Compiled and Written by Himself*, qtd. in Lisa Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 53.

⁹⁵ Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 109.

⁹⁶ Maria Stewart, “Farewell Address,” <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2020/11/20/mrs-stewarts-farewell-address-to-her-friends-in-the-city-of-boston-sept-21-1833/> (accessed 26 March, 2025).

⁹⁷ Maria Stewart, “Farewell Address,” <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2020/11/20/mrs-stewarts-farewell-address-to-her-friends-in-the-city-of-boston-sept-21-1833/>. (accessed 26 March, 2025).

3.4 Conclusions from Reception History

In reception in the Patristic period, in the late medieval period, and through the Reformation and beyond, we see Christians using Ephesians 6:10–20 to arm themselves against all manner of battles, be they inner struggles of temptation or physical tests of faithfulness in the face of persecution by other Christians. In a variety of circumstances, Christians evidently found the imagery of readying themselves for battle meaningful in facing their trials of many kinds. For Christians facing trials and temptations “of the flesh,” the armour of God becomes for them useful daily attire as they inhabit the Christian life; Christians put on the armour of God through the eucharist, baptism, the study of Scripture, and in many instances, they are exhorted to put on Christ himself.⁹⁸ However, it is striking to notice how often Christians facing physical harm, particularly the Anabaptist martyrs, reframe their physical trials as trials “against the spiritual forces of evil” (Eph 6:12). Christians in difficult circumstances, particularly in accounts of martyrdom, but even in fights against political and social injustice, reached for the armour of God in order to make themselves ready to meet the circumstances with faithfulness and resolve. It is also interesting to note how frequently they elaborated on Paul’s original metaphor, stretching it and adapting it to fit their individual circumstances. Especially in what I classified as “anti-imperial” uses, it is also striking that the metaphor users conceived of themselves as soldiers in God’s army, such that their flesh-and-blood enemies became God’s enemies.

In surveying the brief examples of the metaphor’s reception above, several things are perhaps noteworthy. First, it is striking to notice how lively the metaphor continues to be in its reception. There is a real sense in which the users of this metaphor viewed the armour of God as participatory, and the metaphor’s liveliness is evident in the myriad ways the metaphor is extended and shaped to fit the needs of different users in different situations and contexts. CMT would attribute this liveliness to the richly textured mental scripts activated by the metaphor. In some contexts, these scripts function to reframe persecution and martyrdom as battles in which Christians, having put on the armour of God, valiantly fight and are vindicated in the final victory, which paradoxically is often achieved by dying a death that the empire or state intended to shame and humiliate. So too, at times, the “not flesh and blood” enemies in Ephesians 6:10–20 are projected onto “flesh and blood” circumstances, which blends the spiritual realities and the physical circumstances, recasting state-sponsored persecution, fights against injustice, or situations involving personal harm as spiritual warfare. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that the Christian authors redeploying

⁹⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the armour of God in Patristic writings see Strawbridge, *The Pauline Effect*, 57–96.

this Pauline text often lean into the communal aspects of the metaphor, and often the metaphor is used as an exhortation to those the martyred were leaving behind to remain faithful in the ongoing battle. Perhaps this is attributable to a metaphor's capacity to create a sameness of vision for the community; those who have been steeped in the Pauline text have had their worldviews and emotions conditioned by its images, and so were primed to view themselves as fellow soldiers in a bigger WAR. In the communal performance of Ephesians 6:10–20, they learned to inhabit the world as members of Christ's army.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, martyrs in various times and places reached for, and found comfort in, the armour of God when facing persecution and death. However, the armour is equally suitable for facing other forms of temptation or trial, be they moral temptations or unsound doctrine. Here too, CMT would remind us that the mental scripts associated with the armour of God form useful mental constructs for a wide array of situations, and taking on the persona of a soldier in an army makes a myriad of obstacles seem conquerable.

4 Metaphor Theories and the Armour of God: A Useful Tool for Detecting Anti-Imperial Content?

What, finally, can we say about the contribution contemporary theories of metaphor might make to assessing whether Ephesians 6:10–20 is an anti-imperial text? Our analysis above highlights several strengths of the tools and questions these theories bring to the exegesis of New Testament texts. First, as we saw in the straightforward identification of the conceptual metaphor WAR in Ephesians 6:10–20, research in CMT in particular is helpful for thinking carefully about the root conceptual metaphors that underlie textual discourses, and it likewise provides a body of empirical research for identifying and analysing these metaphors. Furthermore, once the root conceptual metaphor(s) underlying a text have been identified, contemporary metaphor theories draw an interpreter's attention to how metaphors activate mental scripts in readers/hearers that are constrained both by the words of the text and by the cultural encyclopaedia in the minds of a metaphor's audience. It is interesting to note that we see this pattern hold in the ongoing use of the metaphor in its reception. The mental scripts activated by later interpreters are constrained in part, and perhaps even primarily, by their own cultural encyclopaedia. Moreover, while it is possible to attempt to reconstruct the cultural encyclopaedia of the original audience in a general sense, the variety of settings we find in its reception perhaps suggests that the earliest audiences likewise found the metaphor relatively elastic, and may well have had variations in their individual mental simulations. Taken together, these insights from CMT strongly suggest that a metaphor's meaning cannot be reduced to its "background," as studies using historical-critical tools often seem to assume.

Furthermore, as is seen in the reception of Ephesians 6:10–20, contemporary metaphor theories perhaps give an interpreter license to conclude that the same textual metaphor might be anti-imperial for one reader/hearer and not for another, or might be read as anti-imperial when circumstances required it, but might also be meaningfully deployed in situations where resistance to the state or empire is not in view.

Second, metaphor theories ask interpreters of the biblical text to attend to the affective and emotive content of a metaphor as it is presented in a text. This set of questions is particularly fruitful for assessing whether a metaphor is anti-imperial because it requires the interpreter to ascertain whether or not a given text is likely to have elicited anti-imperial responses from its audience, and if so, if the audience is likely to have cultivated a “sameness of vision.” As we saw in the case of Revelation 17, the surrounding discourse of the NATION AS PERSON metaphor straightforwardly conditioned an anti-imperial response to Rome/Babylon as Whore. Revelation 17 not only elicited an obvious set of emotive responses (revulsion, disgust, contempt), but clearly directed these responses toward Babylon/Rome creating a “sameness of vision” that the audience could participate in. In Ephesians 6:10–20, the text elicits a clear set of emotive responses, but the object, or opponents, the text picks out (“against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”) are less defined than Rome/Babylon as Whore. As such, the question of whether Ephesians 6:10–20 fostered anti-imperial attitudes is, again, likely down to whether an audience member directed their feelings of “getting ready for battle” toward the empire. As we saw in the metaphor’s reception, this is not an uncommon object of an interpreter’s feelings, but neither is it universal. Perhaps in the case of Ephesians 6:10–20, the “sameness of vision” created by the metaphor is better thought of as a cultivation of an inward-facing group identity. The audience is suited up for battle as members of God’s army, and as an army, they are deployable in battle against any number of God’s enemies.

In my final estimation, the continued ambiguity of whether Ephesians 6:10–20 should be thought of as anti-imperial *in se* reveals several important limitations of CMT for assessing whether any given NT metaphor is anti-imperial. First, because CMT is not a specialised tool for assessing whether a text is anti-imperial, it is most useful as a hermeneutical framework for those texts in the New Testament that are judged to be anti-imperial on other grounds (e.g., Revelation 17). For these anti-imperial texts, metaphor theories can shed considerable light on why the rhetoric is politically powerful and effective, and they also can provide a depth of analysis by probing the root conceptual metaphors, and by attending to the affective and emotive content and social function of these textual metaphors.

A further limitation of CMT is due to how CMT conceptualises the “meaning” of a metaphor. Because CMT resists notions that meaning resides within a text,

the application of CMT to metaphors where anti-imperial content is ambiguous will always yield ambiguous results since meaning lies in the (inaccessible) minds of the readers/hearers. Moreover, CMT does little to screen out the bias of an individual scholar; if one is predisposed to see an ambiguous metaphor as anti-imperial, then CMT lacks the tools to correct for this bias.

Having accounted for the strengths and weaknesses, we might conclude that metaphor theories are useful in describing why anti-imperial metaphors may have been effective means of shaping the anti-imperial attitudes of their users, but it is more difficult to say that CMT or other metaphor theories are useful in identifying whether or not a given metaphor is anti-imperial in the absence of other contextual factors. However, despite some obvious limitations, the analysis of both Revelation 17 and Ephesians 6:10–20 above shows that metaphor theories offer exegetes a powerful set of tools for analysing New Testament metaphors in general, and for analysing political metaphors of the New Testament in particular. Metaphor theories give hermeneuts a thick description for why political metaphors work so effectively as modes of communication, why they can act as such powerful instruments for shaping the identity and world-view of their users, and why certain metaphors have had such durative power, persisting chronologically and across cultures.

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Social Identity Theory

Wrestling with the Social Complexity of Empires

Christopher A. Porter

Apart from being self-described as an Empire, how do they socially function, and how are they cognitively understood? While there are many approaches to determining and describing an Empire, from the Imperial apparatus, to the political structure, and many more, socio-cognitive approaches assist us in examining empires from the perspective of those within, and those interacting with them. Social Identity Theory (SIT) – originally conceived as a socio-cognitive approach to examining intergroup interactions and social prejudice – has since expanded into a meta-theory capable of being applied to a vast range of social and organisational interactions, including self-understanding, the layered complexity of political structures, and leadership endeavours.¹ From this basis it is well suited to not only consider resistance to empire, but also collusion with empire, internal conflicts within empire, and, indeed, engagements which present a multi-faceted and highly variegated interaction with imperial apparatus. Therefore, in this chapter we will begin with a consideration of facets of empire through the lens of a social organisation, before turning to broader concerns of social cognition to describe Social Identity Theory and Categorisation. With this methodological basis we will return to a consideration of empire and a theoretical application of SIT to facets of imperial contexts. Finally, this chapter will be rounded out by two test cases, examining the complex social-category narratives found in the trial scene of the Fourth Gospel, and in the book of Daniel, along with its precedents, ancillary texts, and additions.

1 Empire as Social Organisations

How then can we think of an Empire through a social lens? While the concept of an empire stems from the personal identity of an Emperor, and can be viewed as their realm of sovereign authority and rule of an individual, the term – and reality – came to mean the all-encompassing rule of a ruling group, themselves

¹ Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, “Metatheory: Lessons from Social Identity Research,” *Personal. Soc. Psychol. Rev.* 8.2 (2004): 98–106, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0802_2.

headed by the Emperor, over a large spread of territory.² Indeed, this gives us a hint at the social challenge of empire, for as Howe observes: “Empires, then, must by definition be big, and they must be composite entities, formed out of previously separate units. Diversity – ethnic, national, cultural, often religious – is their essence.”³ Therefore, at the heart of any empire is the idea that it is greater than the sum of its individual parts, as such an empire can never be simply a single entity. It is always the engaging and conquering of other groups which end up being subservient and yet an integral part of the Empire. As such, a significant part of the imperial work is to inculcate and promulgate a unified social identity throughout the empire which will be taken up in varying degrees by the subordinate groups that part of that empire. In this way we must consider an empire as a social organisation, or social organism, which simultaneously presents a unified front and perspective, while also refusing to be statically monolithic. What might make for the outward expression of imperial hegemony is far from a reality of internal uniformity.

Consequently, there are three aspects to this varied social organism which bear brief mention to prime our consideration of social identity. The first is that an empire is not merely the sum total of the constituent parts, and nor is it the simple framing of the sphere of influence of a regent. Rather it is a constantly evolving – bidirectional – relationship between the ruler and the ruled subgroups. This bidirectional relationship presents complexity, as imperial authority must be mediated between competing subgroups within the broader empire – a task often conducted by internal power struggles, transfer of captives, settlers, and leadership, along with broader imperial unifying narratives. However, in addition to this high degree of internal variation and variegation, the second factor is that many of the differences between these subgroup social categories are simultaneously flattened to present an externally coherent and consistent group identity – of the superordinate imperial context. While the Roman empire may have debated internally about the status of certain subgroups – such as Illyrians – within its borders, the external presentation was one of a united Imperial identity. Nevertheless, this raises our third aspect, that each of these interactive subgroups presents social influence upon the whole of the group, via a host of varied means. The interaction of trade, religion, narratives and counter-narratives, outright power struggles, and much more, presents a complexity of social-category interaction throughout the imperial context which requires a robust approach to disentangling, which we shall turn to now.

² Stephen Howe, *Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14.

³ Howe, *Empire*, 16.

2 Social Identity and Cognition

While imperial social identity may take on a wide variety of guises and expressions, the ability to determine identity constructions and allocate it to self and others is almost an intrinsic capability of humanity. We see it displayed in school yards between children, marketed as sporting rivalries, deployed in political discourse, leveraged in nationalistic fervour, and weaponised in warfare; all in much the same cognitive way for millennia. Nevertheless, the cognitive basis and mechanisms for such group categorisations are often less visible and yet can have significant consequences.

A prime – empire-based – example of the external ambiguity of these categorisations comes with the progenitor of Social Identity Theory: a young Polish Jew called Henri Tajfel. Prior to World War II he had taken up studies in Paris, at the Sorbonne; ostensibly studying chemistry, but his real passion was French language and culture. Therefore, at the outbreak of the war he was conscripted into the French army, and captured as the German blitzkrieg tore through Western Europe.⁴ However, instead of being processed as a Polish Jew, he was “identified” by his Francophile identity, as a French prisoner of war. Indeed, it is this misattribution of corporate identity in the context of imperial contest which Tajfel would attribute his eventual survival of the war.⁵ While it was Tajfel’s broader experience of social prejudice and conflict that led him to study psychology, it was the experience of misattributed identity that led to his career defining research into social identity construction and differentiation. In the intervening decades, Social Identity Theory has proven itself as a robust methodology for examining social groups, individual beliefs about self and other, modelling group interactions, interrogating leadership structures, and even large-scale socio-cultural formations in antiquity.⁶

Experimentally SIT began with the famous Minimal Group Experiments, which tried to find the most abstract and minimal conditions by which participants would view themselves through the lens of a group identity, rather than as an individual.⁷ The experiment run by Tajfel and his colleagues found a framework as simple as random allocations framed as personal preference – in this case deciding between modernist painters Paul Klee or Wassily Kadinsky – primed participants to view themselves as a member of the “Klee group” or the “Kadinsky group” and subsequently affected a series of competitive re-

⁴ John C. Turner, “Henri Tajfel: An Introduction,” in *Social Groups and Identities: Developing the Legacy of Henri Tajfel*, ed. William Peter Robinson (Oxford: Psychology Press, 1996), 2.

⁵ Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1.

⁶ Abrams and Hogg, “Metatheory,” 105.

⁷ Joanne R. Smith and S. Alexander Haslam, eds., *Social Psychology: Revisiting the Classic Studies*, Psychology: Revisiting the Classic Studies (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2012).

source allocation tasks.⁸ While it is perhaps unsurprising that participants may favour their own – perceived – group, it was also found that the extent of this bias extended to generating “maximum difference” in the resource allocation, not simply “maximum profit.” That is the participants even penalised their own group such that the competitive differentiation would be maximised. While some – more pessimistic – perspectives on group dynamics view this inter-group discrimination as exemplary of the inevitability of bias and conflict between groups,⁹ Social Identity explanations tend towards understandings of the self within the frame of positive group identification. That is tightly held group identities confer intrinsic value to the broader identity construction of individuals who make up those groups – even if as minimal as being randomly allocated to a group within an experiment.¹⁰ Therefore Tajfel defined:

social identity will be understood as that part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.¹¹

More broadly, that is, believing that one is part of a group is inherent within the beliefs intrinsic to that group.

While one may describe Social Identities from a variety of vantage points, for our purposes here we will consider it first from the perspective of group beliefs and understandings, before considering how these are used to delineate groups and differentiate between them. In the initial instance we may distinguish between group beliefs which are held by the group and used to determine in-group membership, and those beliefs which are allocated to other groups to determine out-group membership. From the cognitive perspective of an in-group member this necessitates one's cognitive alignment with the beliefs of the in-group, a process termed “normative fit.”¹² The normativity of the group may be described as the constellation of shared beliefs which constitute a distinctive in-group identity, including individual and collective representations.¹³ Strikingly, these beliefs do not have to be consistently and broadly agreed upon, but merely justified in the contextual application at hand.¹⁴ From this basic sense

⁸ Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour,” in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1986), 14.

⁹ E.g. Muzafer Sherif, *The Robbers Cave Experiment: Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 155–64.

¹⁰ Tajfel and Turner, “Social Identity Theory,” 33–47.

¹¹ Henri Tajfel, *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 2.

¹² S. Alexander Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2004), 34.

¹³ S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen D. Reicher, and Michael J. Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power* (Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 2011), 66.

¹⁴ Paul Silva, “Justified Group Belief Is Evidentially Responsible Group Belief,” *Episteme* 16 (2019): 262–81, <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.5>.

of “us” for the in-group, a second natural category emerges: “them.” Here the series of beliefs often lie at the boundary between groups, rather than at the core of the groups, and contain sufficient content to differentiate between different groups. As these beliefs are used to compare members of groups with each other, the process of assessing these beliefs is appropriately termed “comparative fit.”¹⁵

In addition to these cognitive mechanisms for defining and assessing group belief, a third heuristic enables the cognitive description of assessing both normative and comparative fit characteristics together. Derived from shared neurological pathways for categorising stimuli this pattern of categorisation likely forms the basis for the inherent nature of group assignment and assessment. Additionally, as this pattern drives much of our understanding of group identity and represents a less familiar theoretical element for empire studies and antiquity, examining its mechanisms in further detail is warranted.

3 Cognitive Norms and Categorisation

Originally formulated to describe the principles which underly human perception and pattern recognition to simply cognitive processing in a complex world, the processes of categorisation have far ranging implications. From understanding the attraction of Jungian typological patterns, through to the widespread adoption of personality testing such as the Myers Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI), or even the acceptance of the logic of the Hogwarts Sorting Hat in popular culture. Eleanor Rosch’s initial studies discovered strong patterns of cognitive minimisation by grouping stimuli by features that can be considered “typical” for various conceptual categories. The quintessential example of this comes with an experiment showing participants various pictures of the category *bird*, such as pigeons, seagulls, hawks, etc; and asking them to decide how well they fit into that category.¹⁶ Interspersed amongst these coherent category stimuli are two other types of pictures. The first are rapidly assessable as not being part of the sought category, such as images of houses or ships. However, the second type of foregrounded stimuli are animals such as penguins, ostriches, or emus – which fit into the target category, but are often considered atypical within it. Rating studies showed that participants rapidly categorised these birds as less typical for the category, with some even asserting that they are not part of the category at all. Subsequent reaction time studies – a good test for rapid assessment of categorical fit – showed that the earlier typicality ratings were good predictors of response times, and less typical stimuli taking longer to assess their category.

¹⁵ Haslam, Reicher, and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*, 67.

¹⁶ Eleanor Rosch, “Principles of Categorization,” in *Cognition and Categorization*, ed. Barbara L. Lloyd (Hilldale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1978), 31.

While multiple theories have been offered to explain the black box of cognition, it is helpful here to briefly consider three models of categorisation to highlight the complexity of social categorisation – especially in an Imperial environment. The first approach comes from Eleanor Rosch's extended studies on categorisation, arguing for a "bottom up" taxonomic frame where a category may be assembled "whenever two or more distinguishable objects or events are treated equivalently."¹⁷ Therefore the perceived world may be structured into categories with correlated stimuli, such as the high correlation patterns of *wings* with *feathers* and *flight* rather than *fur* and *unable-to-fly* as seen above.¹⁸ One significant effect of this categorical correlation is that they tend to become defined in relation to conceptual or theoretical prototypes which are an assemblage of the most typical stimuli for that category. Furthermore, in some cases, these prototypes may be concretely instantiated as "prototypical instances that contain the attributes most representative of items inside and least representative of items outside the category."¹⁹ However, as categories get broader and more overlapping, additional discriminatory features are required to determine the category allocations. For example, a category may have a typical attribute of *has-four-legs* but at this level of granularity one could not determine between the categories of *chair*, *table*, or *dog*. Similarly, if an attribute for an Empire is *ultimate-authority-of-the-leader* then it is difficult to differentiate between Imperial rule, in contrast to Kingly rule, or even in some cases Divine-Theocratic rule. Further discriminating attributes are required. Nevertheless, even at this level of bottom-up categorisation – beginning with attributes – we can see how both normative fit and comparative fit metrics are at play in the complexity of categorisation.

Where Rosch's model worked from the stimuli up to the categories – a bottom-up model – our second model of categorisation works in reverse. Robert Nosofsky proposed that people begin from high level exemplars of a category and then determine the characteristics of stimuli from those exemplars. To return to our bird example, rather than storing an assemblage of *feathers*, *wings*, *beaks*, etc to build the category *bird*, Nosofsky's exemplar model proposes that "the model assumes that people represent the category of 'birds' by storing in memory the vast collection of different sparrows, robins, eagles, ostriches (and so forth) that they have experienced."²⁰ These items are then the comparators for novel stimuli, and if an input is sufficiently similar to a known exemplar then it is categorised as such. Indeed, this appears to be empirically plausible, as priming effects cause reaction times to not only decrease for similar category items but

¹⁷ C. B. Mervis and E. Rosch, "Categorization of Natural Objects," *Annual Review of Psychology* 32 (1981): 89.

¹⁸ Rosch, "Principles of Categorization," 31.

¹⁹ Rosch, "Principles of Categorization," 31.

²⁰ Robert M. Nosofsky, "The Generalized Context Model: An Exemplar Model of Classification," in *Formal Approaches in Categorization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511921322.002>.

significantly increase for coherent non-exemplary members of a category, such as *penguin* or *kiwi* for the category *bird*. This suggests some form of prioritisation for category exemplars rather than simply aggregating categorical characteristics. Furthermore, this takes on greater specificity when considering specific examples of a category, such as *my-cat* or *eagle-which-stole-my-lunch* as opposed to the broader categories of *cat* or *bird*.²¹ However, Nosofsky overstates his proposition somewhat as he argues that “this exemplar view of categorization contrasts dramatically with major alternative approaches.”²² Rather it is more likely that varying stimuli activate different cognitive mechanisms, such that multiple approaches can be utilised to bring both a bottom up aggregate of typicality and a top-down exemplary expression approach; as indeed we find in memory studies.²³ Nevertheless, Nosofsky’s model finds particular application when considering social category leadership. As Haslam et al. discovered, a leader acting as a group exemplar was critical for “when the group was highly salient what really mattered to group members was whether the leader was prototypical of the group. This was more important than whether the leader displayed leader-stereotypic characteristics.”²⁴

The final model that we will consider here is a fuzzy logic model from Arash Javanbakht, built upon neural networks for assessing both prototypicality and exemplars. Instead of assessing relatively static cognitive inputs, this model builds a context specific perception from an autoassociative neural network, recognising the socially and contextually embedded nature of stimuli communication in the process.²⁵ Within this model the process of stimuli recognition and subsequent categorisation is dependent on the broader salience of other categories present in the environment. Therefore the context of the categorisation adds further information in the categorisation process, such that the stimuli of a lion or tiger may not represent a categorisation yielding fear in the context of a zoo enclosure, but is significantly differently categorised in the Serengeti.²⁶ Yet in this example the presenting stimulus has not changed, it is still a large cat of genus *Panthera*, but the presenting context distorts the stimulus such that the category is formulated differently as *wild-animal-dangerous* rather than *wild-animal-safe*. George

²¹ Eleanor Rosch et al., “Basic Objects in Natural Categories,” *Cognitive Psychology* 8 (1976): 382–439.

²² Nosofsky, “The Generalized Context Model,” 18.

²³ Angela Kinnell and Simon Dennis, “The Role of Stimulus Type in List Length Effects in Recognition Memory,” *Memory & Cognition* 40 (2012): 311–25, <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13421-011-0164-2>.

²⁴ Haslam, Reicher, and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*, 9.

²⁵ Arash Javanbakht, “A Neural Network Model for Schemas Based on Pattern Completion.” *Journal of American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry* 39 (2011): 243–61, <https://doi.org/10.1521/jaap.2011.39.2.243>.

²⁶ Arash Javanbakht, “A Theory of Everything: Overlapping Neurobiological Mechanisms of Psychotherapies of Fear and Anxiety Related Disorders,” *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* (2018): 458, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2018.00328>.

Lakoff addresses this problem in a field closer to that of antiquity and empire studies, as he considers natural language metaphors.²⁷ His quintessential example involves the consideration of what may be categorised as *tall*.²⁸ One initial approach may be to assess *tall*-ness in relation to an arbitrary height, over which one is considered *tall*, for example 2.0m. But this presents challenges in considering what may make for a *tall* horse jockey or racing car driver. Therefore, one might wish to consider other contexts which prioritise *tall*-ness normatively, such as basketball. Indeed, most famous basketball players would be considered *tall*, such as Lebron James, Shaquille O’Neal, or Michael Jordan. However, while James and O’Neal are over the arbitrary threshold set earlier, Jordan is just under at 1.98m. Furthermore, Muggsy Bogues holds the title for the shortest ever player in the NBA, where he had an extensive 14-season career with many highlights. While Bogues would be considered exemplary for the category *basketball-player* on almost every metric he would struggle to qualify for the category *tall*. These fuzzy categorisations challenge the arbitrary boundaries between categories, and their applications. Lakoff described distinctions between categories which fall on linguistic bounds – such as tomatoes simultaneously being *vegetables* and *fruits*, depending on context – as “hedges.”²⁹

All of these approaches to categorisation we can observe within the social-identity attribution for Henri Tajfel. Originally legally identifiable as a *Polish-Jew*, his presence on the Western front rather than the Eastern front, along with the salient category cues of French-speaking and Francophile nature led to his social-identity categorisation as a *French-prisoner-of-war*.³⁰ Secondly, while Tajfel did not cease to be a *Polish-Jew*, it is the external authority of the group involved in categorisation which allocated him to the social category *French-prisoner-of-war* on the basis of his captor’s identity heuristics. Similarly, each of these contribute to our constructions of “empire” and how to treat the various constituent parts which make up the diversity of expression within the system.

4 Empire and Social Identity

From this outline of Social Identity Theory, we must now turn to one final methodological aspect to consider in our application of SIT to empires in antiquity, as to how social identities may be extracted and analysed from the

²⁷ See from the chapter from Erin Heim in this volume, which includes a lengthier expansion on cognitive metaphor theory and categorical simulations.

²⁸ George Lakoff, “Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts,” *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 2 (1973): 458.

²⁹ Lakoff, “Hedges,” 458.

³⁰ Rupert Brown, *Henri Tajfel: Explorer of Identity and Difference: Explorer of Identity and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2019), 32–37.

textual and material environment. Although most social psychological studies are conducted with physical participants and considering presentist concerns – often via immediate social priming – the patterns of identity formation and promulgation are not significantly different in historical context from their real-time expressions.

One of the most powerful mechanisms for establishing identity structures is through the promulgation of identity formative narratives and broadly functions analogously for both individual and corporate narratives. A helpful approach to examining these narrative identity structures comes from Dan McAdams and Kate McLean, who examined how autobiographical narratives are promulgated as a means of constructing identity, within a continuous cognitively affective process. They described this process as the creation of

stories, which in turn create selves ... through repeated interactions with others, stories about personal experiences are processed, edited, reinterpreted, retold, and subjected to a range of social and discursive influences, as the storyteller gradually develops a broader and more integrative narrative identity.³¹

From a corporate perspective, these narratives function analogously, with societal – and imperial – retellings of corporate events building the shared social identity of the Empire. Indeed, in a modern context this is what Martha Augoustinos found in her examination of the controversial constructions of “Australian identity” from the right-wing Australian politician Pauline Hanson’s inaugural speeches to Parliament:

Pauline Hanson’s maiden speech is ... very clearly designed *not* to secure local, parliamentary, acceptance, but rather to construct a membership category – of ‘ordinary Australians’... Hanson thus claims a particularly potent political representativity *by virtue* of her category membership – the warrant for her position is her claim that her personal identity and the true ‘Australian’ national identity are one and the same.³²

Additionally, these narratives may be embedded and layered on top of each other in interactive forms, as we will see with the example of the Danielic court-tales and the *Liber de Morte Alexandri* anon. However, it is instructive here to consider two specific layered Imperial and counter-Imperial narratives in modern construction, and one from antiquity. The first comes from an attempt to leverage an interaction in autobiographical narrative form with the prevailing cultural narrative, as a claim to leadership and authority. As strikingly highlighted by Stephen Reicher and Nick Hopkins recounting of an attempt by a Scottish politician of the British Conservative party – Bill Walker – attempted to por-

³¹ Dan P. McAdams and Kate C. McLean, “Narrative Identity,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22 (2013): 235, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622>.

³² Mark Rapley and Martha Augoustinos, “‘National Identity’ as a Rhetorical Resource,” in *Language, Interaction and National Identity – Studies in the Social Organisation of National Identity* (London: Routledge, 2002).

tray himself in a distinctly Scottish identity, by wearing a kilt into the House of Commons. As Reicher and Hopkins observed:

To the degree that the kilt is a national symbol it follows that to wrap oneself in the kilt is almost literally to wrap oneself in the national flag. Certainly the Conservative MP, Bill Walker, implied as much when he bared his legs in the House of Commons. The occasion was his introduction of a Parliamentary Bill which would make constitutional change for Scotland virtually impossible. Walker may have hoped that his wearing of the kilt would help in representing himself, and hence his measure, as speaking for Scotland.³³

However, as the parliamentary record attests, this social identity construction backfired as another Scottish politician – Sir Nicholas Fairbairn – interjected:

On a point of order Madam Speaker. My Hon. Friend the Member for Tayside North suggested that he was in highland dress. He is in nothing of the kind. He misled the House and I have reason to believe that he is wearing little red pants under his kilt.³⁴

The assertion of Walker wearing underwear “under there” undercut his attempts to portray himself as prototypically Scottish, as underwear under traditional dress is a distinctively English – and non-Scottish – norm.

The second example comes from an examination of the political arguments which led to the collective “Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews” in the spring of 1943. While the majority of Axis-aligned countries participated in terrible anti-Jewish pogroms, along with deporting much of their Jewish population, Bulgaria is conspicuous in the collective rescue of most of the 50,000 person Jewish population.³⁵ Tzvetan Todorov’s compilation of the Bulgarian State Archives – published as *The Fragility of Goodness* – highlighted the broad and varied mechanisms for collective appeal, including sermons, legislation, and other subversive activities. However, as Reicher et al. found in these archives, a significant proportion of these mechanisms involved “a process of contestation and the specific category definitions which arise within it”³⁶ where most of these appeals “presuppose a national framework and include the Jews as part of the national ingroup.”³⁷ That is, in this period, the social-category of “Jew” – which was generally formulated with ethnic bounds – was construed as an integral part of the larger social-category “Bulgarian.”³⁸ Such as is made explicit in this extract from a legislative bill: “the bill’s objective is to deprive a Bulgarian national

³³ Stephen Reicher and Nick Hopkins, *Self and Nation: Categorization, Contestation and Mobilization* (London: SAGE, 2001).

³⁴ Sir Nicholas Fairbairn; Hansard 9.2.93: 825

³⁵ Nadège Ragaru, *Et les Juifs bulgares furent sauvés: une histoire des savoirs sur la Shoah en Bulgarie* (Paris: Sciences po les presses, 2020).

³⁶ Stephen Reicher et al., “Saving Bulgaria’s Jews: An Analysis of Social Identity and the Mobilisation of Social Solidarity,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 36 (2006): 57.

³⁷ Reicher et al., “Saving Bulgaria’s Jews,” 59.

³⁸ Deborah Mayersen, “Saving Bulgarian Jewry from the Holocaust: The Role of National Identity,” *Ethnopolitics* 23 (2024): 458, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2023.2216520>.

minority of its civil rights ... Our legislature must not approve a law that will enslave one part of Bulgaria's citizens, and leave a black page in our modern history.”³⁹ Thus, the Bulgarian Jews are not only marginally, but thoroughly, Bulgarian, and hold a place of significant normativity within the group. As Mayersen observes: “Bulgarian Jews were not perceived as ‘outsiders’ prior to the Holocaust, and this perception proved resistant to manipulation.”⁴⁰ Yet, it is worth noting that the integration of *Bulgarian-Jews* within the super-ordinate category of *Bulgarian* does not obviate their parallel sub-group identity of *Jew*. Rather they still maintained their sub-group identity, while taking part in the complexity of being a sub-group as part of the super-ordinate national identity. Indeed, just as the national identity of *Bulgarian* itself was part of the broader complexity of Imperial *Axis* identity.

Lest we think that these types of narrativised constructions of identity shifting are limited to our modern environment – where identity politics makes identity constructions far more explicit – it is constructive to consider the mutable nature of the Illyrians within antiquity. Pomponius Mela and Pliny both wrote of the Illyrians as “*sunt quos proprie Illyrios vocant*” and “*proprieque dicti Illyri*” respectively.⁴¹ But, as these quotes suggest, other groups utilised different labelling for these ethnic groups, with other intra-Imperial groups utilising the label “*Liburni*” to describe the same social-category – possibly driven by inter-group conflict.⁴² In his analysis of the socio-ethnic category, Danijel Dzino observes that the label of “Illyrian” appears to be an intra-Imperial referent of Greek origin, while the “*Liburni*” stemmed from hostility, and the overall label “heavily depended on the historical or political contexts where the label was used.”⁴³ As we can see *in nuce* here, the debate over the salience of social category membership and appellations was just as pertinent in antiquity as in our modern society.

Through this narratival construction of paired personal and corporate identity we see how the same mechanisms of narrative identity construction are often at work in corporate identity construal. These presentations of contextually salient category membership allow for a promulgation of the prototypicality of an individual within the social category. From a categorisation perspective, an effective narratival identity promulgation will serve to highlight the prototypicality of the individual and enable the rapid categorisation of that individual within the group. Furthermore, from a leadership perspective this identity

³⁹ Cited in Reicher et al., “Saving Bulgaria’s Jews,” 58.

⁴⁰ Mayersen, “Saving Bulgarian Jewry from the Holocaust,” 463.

⁴¹ “those who are properly called Illyrians,” Pomp. Mela., *De chorographia*, 2.56.1; “properly named Illyrians,” Pliny, *Natural History*, 3.144.

⁴² Marjeta Šašel Kos, *Appian and Illyricum*, Situla 43 (Ljubljana: Narodni muzej Slovenije, 2005), 53.

⁴³ Danijel Dzino, “‘Illyrians’ in Ancient Ethnographic Discourse,” *Dialogues d’histoire ancienne* 40 (2014): 61.

promulgation serves to establish the not only the ‘one-of-us-ness’ of the individual for the group, but in as much as it highlights prototypicality, the correlated leadership authority for the social-category. Thus, we may see identity claimant narratives – or narrative identity constructions – as not only a means of personal identity construal, or corporate social identity construction, but also as leadership prototypicality claims.

5 Empires and Normativity

How then can we apply these cognitive approaches to formulations and investigations of empire and its criticism? As with many other political structures Empires function as social organisations, as we have already seen. Yet, Empires differ from kingdoms, nation states, commonwealths, and other political structures in certain – critical – ways.

One of the key features of Empires – as opposed to Kingdoms – comes with a certain degree of diversity in the range of sub-groups absorbed into the empire, via various means. While a kingdom, nation state, or even a multinational state may presume some degree of homogeneity within its boundaries, an empire – by the nature of its formulation – does not have the same degree of homogenous normativity. Instead, as Empires are intrinsically made up of a variety of groups it may be better considered as a series of subgroups of a shared superordinate social identity that constitutes the empire as a whole.

Given the breadth of an empire, defining specific sets of beliefs or behaviours to consider normative presents a significant challenge, especially given the varied contextual embedding of these social features. Therefore, similar to other exceedingly large groups, normativity tends to be found focused either at the centre or the edges of the organisation.⁴⁴ Centralised normative fit often works within the context of group leadership, in our case the edifice of Imperial authority and specifically the personage of the Emperor. While edge-based normativity – comparative fit – focuses on those features which make one either part of the empire or firmly outside of the bounds. Although we do not have sufficient space to consider these aspects in significant detail, recent studies have demonstrated both of these features in modern political environments, although we will return to their parallels in antiquity anon.

The first comes in the demands of normativity within leadership of a disparately federated political party, as Haslam et al. examined a dual-agency model of leadership between Donald Trump and his supporters in 2021.⁴⁵ Here they

⁴⁴ Richard E. Hayes and David S. Alberts, *Power to the Edge: Command and Control in the Information Age*, Information Age Transformation Series (Washington, DC: CCRP, 2003).

⁴⁵ S. Alexander Haslam et al., “Examining the Role of Donald Trump and His Supporters in the 2021 Assault on the U.S. Capitol: A Dual-Agency Model of Identity Leadership and Engaged

found a pattern of normativity where Trump's remarks were taken as "defining parameters of action in ways that frame the agency of their followers but leave space for creativity in how collective goals are accomplished."⁴⁶ Thus by extending normativity in leadership Trump fostered a social-category context whereby "followers in turn, exhibit[ed] their loyalty and attachment to the leader by striving to be effective in advancing these goals"⁴⁷ even if specific directions were not given. Therefore, from a centralised normativity framework we can understand "leadership [as] a co-production between leaders and followers rooted in a sense of shared social identity."⁴⁸

The second example stems from the 2016 American election, and the edge based comparative fit metrics of both the Democrat and Republican parties. In surveying voters just prior to the election, Christian et al. found that not only did voters perceive the Democrat party as more "diverse" than the Republican party, but that this translated into edge based comparative fit metrics.⁴⁹ While the Republican party voters "strongly endorse[d] their own ingroup, reporting strong similarities with other members" but also generated "a clear distinction between Republicans and Democrats."⁵⁰ In comparison the Democrat party was viewed as upholding "group's values [that] facilitate[d] a sense of similarity and inclusion" and these "ingroup values, emphasizing fairness and inclusion for outgroup members, led to a reduction in intergroup bias."⁵¹ Therefore, as they concluded, "within the context of a national, intergroup competition, these same core values however shape the Democrat ingroup into being too permeable" which led to an uncertainty as to who was "in" and who was "out" in comparative fit metrics, and contributed to the Democrat loss of the election.

6 Examining Empires

6.1 Leadership Prototypicality

As we have seen in the description of the dual-agency model, and earlier when considering the narrated prototypicality attempts of Pauline Hanson and Bill Walker, a significant consideration of social identity is the prototypicality re-

Followership," *Leadership Quarterly* 34 (2023): 101622, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lequa.2022.101622>.

⁴⁶ Haslam et al., "A Dual Agency Model of Identity Leadership and Engaged Followership."

⁴⁷ Haslam et al., "A Dual Agency Model of Identity Leadership and Engaged Followership."

⁴⁸ Haslam et al., "A Dual Agency Model of Identity Leadership and Engaged Followership."

⁴⁹ Julie Christian et al., "Them and Us: Did Democrat Inclusiveness and Republican Solidarity Lead to the 2016 US Presidential Election Outcome?," *Leadership* (2018): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715018793733>.

⁵⁰ Christian et al., "Them and Us," 13.

⁵¹ Christian et al., "Them and Us," 13.

quired to be considered a leader within the group. As we will see, this is even more complex within an Imperial context, as leadership prototypicality takes on the challenge to act in normative ways across a variety of layered social categories. Simply being normative within a specific category is insufficient, as the leader must be perceived to have normative characteristics for the superordinate group, as well as their subgroup, and a host of other groups. Indeed, the debate regarding Illyrian would return in the late third-century with the rise of the Illyrian emperors to counteract the leadership crisis in Rome.⁵² An additional – lighter – example may also be found with the nickname of *Graeculus* given to Emperor Hadrian, in part due to his affinity with the Greek styling of facial hair, which would subsequently be weaponised by his opponents as linking him too closely with Nero.⁵³

6.2 *The Civilised, the Barbarians and Comparative Fit*

At the edges of the social-category construction matrix we find a particular use of normativity which imperial rhetoric appears to utilise regularly. While the dynamics of ingroup norming almost inevitably lead to outgroup othering, many empires entrench this dichotomy. The Roman imperium was notable in this framing, with the limits of “civilisation” being the borders of the Empire, while everyone outside of these borders was considered a “barbarian.”⁵⁴ Indeed, this framework was subsequently extended within the Christianised empire, as those outside the empire were not only uncivilised, but considered to be ungodly as well. While this would highlight the need for a group to maintain delineated group boundaries in order to maintain social-category coherence, it is perhaps even more important within an Imperial context, given the variegation of sub-group social-categories within the superordinate Empire.

7 John as Addressing both Jewish and Roman Social Identity

As we turn to examining social categorisation and interactions with imperial social identity in action let us begin with a relatively simple example from the Fourth Gospel, as the Evangelist seeks to establish a social-category identity in a two-way interactive context: between Rome and Jerusalem. While the series of two-way categorisations arise repeatedly throughout the Fourth Gospel, they reach their crescendo in the dual interactions of the trial narrative of John 18

⁵² John Greville Agard Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 49.

⁵³ Anthony R. Birley, *Hadrian: The Restless Emperor* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997), 16.

⁵⁴ Howe, *Empire*, 16.

and 19. Here we will examine these interactions through the methodological approach described by a Structured Analysis of Group Arguments – a heuristic for examining social-category arguments formally described by Stephen Reicher and Fabio Sani to analyse how social groups leverage group dynamics to argue for their own social-category, especially in the context of complex inter-group and intra-group relations.⁵⁵

Within SAGA four different types of arguments were described, of which two are directly applicable to group differentiation, with the other two represent negative empty sets. The first, labelled Type A, describes an argument which portrays a positive view of the parent group – the superordinate group – along with a consonantly positive view of the in-group as continuing those specific positive characteristics or behaviours of the parent group. Alongside these positive descriptions is a negative ascription of out-group behaviour or normativity. Type B arguments reverse the value judgements from Type A, with a negative ascription about the super-ordinate group, and a subsequent assertion that the out-group behaves consonantly with this negative ascription, while the in-group positively rejects the negative behaviour of the super-ordinate. Taken together, Reicher and Sani described these arguments as contributing to a larger proclamation that “the in-group faction perpetuates the true identity of the parent group and negates negations of that identity, whereas the out-group faction subverts the true identity of the parent group and perpetuates negations of that identity.”⁵⁶

With these argumentative types in mind, let us turn to the Johannine trial scene. The Evangelist presents the scene in two parts, delineated by the change in the two out-group named actors as social-category leaders within the scenes: firstly Annas and Caiaphas, and then Pilate.⁵⁷ In the opening scene Annas and Caiaphas are described effectively as a single unit, chronologically tied to the earlier advice recorded in John 11 (18:14), and also as social-category representatives within their own sub-group of *Iouδαιοι*: the “chief priests and Pharisees” (ἐκ τῶν ἀρχιερέων καὶ ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων; 18:3). Jesus too is functioning as a social-category representative – despite his isolation – with the narrative describing the Beloved Disciple and Simon Peter’s incursion into the compound (18:15–16), and the repeated mention of wider “disciples and teaching” (18:19). In addition, both groups are described within the broader social-category of *Iouδαιοι*, directly for Annas and Caiaphas (18:3; 12; 14), and Jesus implicitly as he engaged in teaching within the Temple, and “where all the ‘Iouδαιοι come together” (18:20). Thus we can read the trial scene as an Imperial social identity interaction, especially in the

⁵⁵ Stephen Reicher and Fabio Sani, “Introducing SAGA: Structural Analysis of Group Arguments,” *Group Dynamics* 2 (1998): 270, <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2699.2.4.267>.

⁵⁶ Reicher and Sani, “Introducing SAGA,” 279.

⁵⁷ Although Warren Carter argues that Pilate represents the constant figure in these scenes – instead of the high priests – ultimately the constant is Jesus, as representing the in-group *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2008), 289.

context of Caiapha's assertion, and the post-70CE dating of the Fourth Gospel. Furthermore, this interaction sets up attempts at power dynamics between the *Ioudaioi* sub-groups, with the high-priestly group attempting to exert power over Jesus and the *Jesus-followers* – especially given the physical response from the nearby attendant in 18:22. But, despite this power play, the Evangelist asserts a degree of security for Jesus – and by extension the *Jesus-follower* social category – with the response in 18:23 appealing to the accepted superordinate-group jurisprudence and by challenging the legitimacy of a violent response also implicitly challenging the legitimacy of their authority.⁵⁸ Even in this brief scene we can see a SAGA Type A argument play out, with Jewish jurisprudence being positively upheld, with Jesus both appealing to his right standing in this jurisprudential procedure, while also emphasising the out-group's violation of the superordinate-group's judicial norms. In essence the Evangelist is asserting the *Jesus-follower* in-group as not only superior to the *Jerusalem* or *chief-priests-and-Pharisees* out-group, but also the rightful inheritors of the superordinate category *Ioudaioi*.

This shift in power-arrangements is reinforced by the following scene – interleaved after Peter's denial – where the recognition of a lack of power leads the trial to Pilate's doorstep, in a liminal space outside the praetorium (18:29).⁵⁹ Ostensibly this is due to superordinate group social-category norms regarding being defiled for Passover,⁶⁰ it also introduces a new Imperial social dynamic, with Pilate's position of Imperial superiority relativising the now-sub-group authority of the *chief-priests-and-Pharisees* group.⁶¹ Against this background of superficial Imperial magnanimity there is we find a repeated struggle between Pilate as the Imperial agent, and the representatives of the *chief-priests-and-Pharisees* out-group, over the categorisation of Jesus and by extension the *Jesus-follower* group. Within this struggle the out-group representatives first attempt to categorise Jesus as an “evil-doer” (*κακὸν ποιῶν*; 18:30) – an anti-norm of the superordinate group. However, the Evangelist records Pilate's immediate response as construing Jesus as an archetypal member of the superordinate category *Ioudaios*: ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ιουδαίων (18:33) – not merely just a member. From Pilate's perspective as a non-Jew (μήτι ἐγώ Ιουδαῖος εἰμι; 18:35) and as an authoritative member of the Imperial group – accustomed to dealing with the variety and variegation of social-category membership within the Empire – this emphasises the external enmeshment of Jesus and his followers with the category *Ioudaioi*. However, despite Pilate's assertion of Jesus' social-category as *Ioudaioi*, he re-

⁵⁸ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1095–96.

⁵⁹ Nils Neumann's analysis of Pilate in his essay in this volume through the lens of historical psychology presents a similar reading to the one offered here, in more detail.

⁶⁰ Carter, *John and Empire*, 301.

⁶¹ Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations*, 25.

sponds by presenting the *Jesus-follower* subgroup in nuanced differentiation: answering that the “servants” of “my kingdom” (18:36) would oppose his capture by “the people and chief priests” (τὸ ἔθνος τὸ σὸν καὶ οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς; 18:35).

Nevertheless, Pilate reinforces his perspective as an Imperial superordinate group leader by repeatedly conflating varied subgroups under their superordinate – and ignoring comparative fit markers for subgroup differentiation – in this case by tauntingly referring to Jesus as τὸν βασιλέα τῶν Ἰουδαίων in his pronouncements (18:38–39). Kierspel observes of the Evangelist’s reporting of this interaction that “Jesus is presented in a subtle way as a royal superior to the Jews as well as to the governor.”⁶² Thus, the Evangelist can simultaneously engage in both intra-group and Imperial critique. Continuing these dual critiques, the crowd in the Fourth Gospel does not rise to Pilate’s bait but maintains their intra-group perspective of Jesus as an errorist and redirects their focus to the terrorist: Barabbas. Through the lens of SIT, this suggests that intra-group interaction has been outweighed by inter-group concerns. This leads to the crowd lowering their identification with the superordinate social category *Ioudaioi* in favour of alternate identities. Pilate, however, continues from his own position of Imperial power, and describes Jesus as a prototypical member of the *Ioudaioi* before reinforcing the superordinate power hierarchy by having him flogged (19:1), with the soldiers mocking continuing to categorise Jesus as prototypical *Ioudaioi* (19:2–3), along with the eventual presentation of Jesus to the waiting crowd in faux-Imperial imagery (19:5).⁶³

In the continuation of the scene the Evangelist partly exonerates the broader social category *Ioudaioi* from those bringing accusations and requesting crucifixion, by returning to their subgroup appellation “chief priests and officials” (οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ ὑπηρέται; 19:6). In part this allows for the separation of Imperial concerns from the socio-ethnic framework in a post-70CE context. Replacing these norms comes a novel series of prototypical norms based around Jesus as the “Son of God” (19:7). Although the Evangelist portrays this as an intra-group jurisprudential – Torah-based – concern, it continues his dual critique of Empire, as it inspires fear in Pilate, despite his *Imperial* superordinate category membership (19:8).⁶⁴ Much of this stems from the broader Imperial context, with a wider category of divinity able to be appealed to. Thus, as the social-category of *sons-of-the-gods* is a significantly higher social power within the set of Imperial norms – and indeed one which is potentially quite dangerous – Pilate’s

⁶² Lars Kierspel, *The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel: Parallelism, Function, and Context*, WUNT II/220 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 70.

⁶³ Note the difficulty of this position if Jesus was a member of the same social group, or another higher power group. Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations*, 26.

⁶⁴ A preferred translation of 19:8 would be “he became afraid for a new reason” – following BDAG’s second semantic option “to be afraid for a new reason” – as no prior point in the narrative has Pilate appeared afraid.

fear is of little wonder. However, this shift of social power presents a curious relativisation of the social-category hierarchy which hitherto had Pilate at the top of the immediate pyramid, with Jesus at the bottom. Here, Jesus response in 19:11 extends the divine power dynamic within the situation and reinforces this inverted Imperial power structure for the audience's benefit.⁶⁵

In response, as Pilate attempts to extricate himself from the enmeshing social dynamic (19:12), the crowd responds by further entangling him within his own Imperial social location, by threatening him with the possible consequence of an accusation that he has renounced his allegiance to the Roman empire – through a disassociation with Caesar – if he allows Jesus to be exonerated.⁶⁶ Now firmly entangled within the complexity of Imperial social category interaction, Pilate submits to the waiting mob, and brings Jesus out to the place of Imperial judgement (19:13). Nevertheless, Pilate continues to attempt to release Jesus and refers to him as a *Ioudaioi* group leader, even if sarcastically: describing him as “your King” (τὸν βασιλέα ὑμῶν; 19:15). Yet, the Evangelist records perhaps the most incisive of his dual identity critiques, as the outgroup representatives recategorise themselves, declaring ultimate allegiance to the Roman empire: “We have no king but Caesar” (οὐκ ἔχομεν βασιλέα εἰ μὴ Καίσαρα; 19:15).⁶⁷ At the culmination of this social category debate, this severs the *chief-priests-and-Pharisees* subgroup from the *Ioudaioi* group by realigning their own Imperial declaration away from a Torah based framework of God’s reign over Israel (Exod. 15:18, Judges 8:23, 1 Sam. 8:7). Simultaneously it embeds Jesus’ position as a prototypical exemplar for the social-category *Ioudaioi*, through Pilate’s declaration as the Imperial authority that he is the “King of the Jews” (19:19). While the *chief-priests-and-Pharisees* subgroup finally realise this social-category allocation during the crucifixion – protesting to Pilate that it is an unratified group claim⁶⁸ – it is too late. Indeed, for the audience they too are invited to identify with Pilate’s assertion and see the significance of the Imperial sign in the Johannine Jesus’ claim to prototypicality of the social-category *Ioudaioi*. Moreover, the Evangelist capitalises on Pilate’s fear and emphasises the in-group norm of divinity which supersedes the Imperial identity, through capitalising on normative Imperial ideology to characterise Jesus within a fuzzy category of a Roman Caesar.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Warren Carter, “Social Identities, Subgroups, and John’s Gospel: Jesus the Prototype and Pontius Pilate (John 18.28–19.16),” in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: T&T Clark, 2014), 247.

⁶⁶ Carter, *John and Empire*, 308.

⁶⁷ Carter, *John and Empire*, 309.

⁶⁸ Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 802.

⁶⁹ Laura J Hunt, *Jesus Caesar: A Roman Reading of the Johannine Trial Narrative*, WUNT II/506 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-157527-3>.

From a structured group argument (SAGA) standpoint, this trial scene presents one of the strongest social group arguments in the Fourth Gospel, nuanced as it is between both local *Ioudaioi* social-category superordinate concerns, alongside contrast and critique with Roman Imperial superordinate perspectives. Throughout we see the motif of divine rule presented positively for the *Ioudaioi* superordinate group, and also for the *Jesus-follower* ingroup; alongside implicit rejection from the *chief-priests-and-Pharisees* outgroup, and reacting with concern and fear from the Imperial superordinate group: ultimately culminating in the Imperial affirmation “we have no king but Caesar” (19:15) – a statement in stark relief given 70CE. This affirmation of dual out group usage in this scene serves to ironically align the *chief-priests-and Pharisees* with the *Roman-Empire* and Pilate as an outgroup dissonant to that of the *Ioudaioi* social-category. However, perhaps most shockingly for modern analysis – sensitive to supersessionism – is the implication that the authorial ingroup of *Jesus-followers* are construed as proper inheritors to the social category *Ioudaioi*.⁷⁰ However, we must acknowledge two associated realities here. First, in any such “group evolution” perspective – even one involving intra-group conflict and schism – involves all parties presenting supersessionist tendencies and perspectives. After all this is the basis for group evolution and inheritance. Second, we can see – with the benefit of perfect hindsight – that these social category arguments are, like many other social category arguments, an ultimately failed attempt at direct social identity formation, if indeed the apparent aim is to provide a coherent re-framing of the social-category *Ioudaioi* in a post-70CE context. Indeed, what we find is that the Fourth Gospel found a far more effective intra-Imperial context with a Gentile audience, separate from later constructions of *Ioudaioi*.⁷¹

8 Daniel as Challenging Ptolemaic and Jewish Social Identities

Moving from our relatively simple dual-engagement model of social-category contestation and Imperial critique, we will now turn to a more complex layered series of narratives which engage in multidimensional Imperial engagement, and social category definition. Within the text of canonical Daniel we find a powerful multi-dimensional interaction with various constructions of Empire, and when taken along with broader additions to Daniel, and other contemporaneous texts we gain a rich picture of mixed interactions with Empire. Although traditional

⁷⁰ For a monograph length exploration of this construction, see: Christopher A. Porter, *Johannine Social Identity Formation after the Fall of the Jerusalem Temple: Negotiating Identity in Crisis*, BINS 194 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 146, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004469822>.

⁷¹ Indeed, this leads to much of the problematic interpretation of intragroup vitriol and polemic when transferred into intergroup contexts. While much more could be said there is no space to delve into the effect of Imperial ideology on the “heathens outside” here.

scholarship, and the internal narrative setting, place the Danielic court tales and apocalypse within the orbit of the Babylonian empire, some scholars have started considering Egyptian contexts for the final form of the works, and its additions.⁷² As such, we will consider Daniel and its attendant additions and contemporaneous texts within a broadly putative Egyptian context.

While the Daniel narrative begins in Babylon, and at a much later time, it is well recognised that the figure of Daniel functions as an intertextual character, often seen as a Joseph revividus.⁷³ However, while the Joseph narratives from Genesis present the patriarch as a visionary diviner, enabled by mantic wisdom, and given a position of power within the Egyptian court and Imperial system, they also present a Joseph who is utterly integrated within that same empire – to such a degree that his own brothers do not recognise him in Pharaoh’s court (Gen 42:8). This creates a problem for readers who wish to take Joseph as a distinctive narrative identity construction – especially if located in Egypt – as while he displays significant normative fit patterns for the Jewish diaspora, his degree of comparative fit – being set apart from the Egyptian culture – is almost entirely lacking. It is probably this lack of identity distinctiveness which inspired later authors to correct – subtly and overtly – these Josephic identity constructions. Indeed, as Lachlan Davis has demonstrated, this even occurs within the redactional hands at work within the received form of Genesis.⁷⁴ However, here we will turn to overt imperial engagements in later texts.

Perhaps the most striking retelling of the Joseph narrative comes in the novella *Joseph and Aseneth*, which maintains the Egyptian context of the story and its broad contours – unlike other retellings such as that from Philo, Josephus, or even Daniel – and yet seeks to restore Joseph’s comparative fit metrics along with reinforcing his normative fit within the context. A couple of brief scenes highlight this counter-Imperial formation. First, in contrast to the meal scene of Genesis 43, where Joseph is described as eating with the Egyptians (43:32), while the Hebrews ate separately due to socio-cultural norms, one of the opening scenes of

⁷² See Amy C. Merrill Willis, “A Reversal of Fortunes: Daniel among the Scholars,” *CurBR* 16.2 (2018): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993X17711665>; Tawny Holm, *Of Courtiers and Kings: The Biblical Daniel Narratives and Ancient Story-Collections*, EANECC 1 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013); Christopher A. Porter and Paul Porter, “Of Monsters and Men: Reading Daniel with the *Liber De Morte (Metz Epitome)*,” *JSOT* 48.3 (2024): 332–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03090892231210892>; Christopher A. Porter and Paul Porter, “Daniel in the Land of the Oniads: Reading ‘Babylonian Tales’ in Ptolemaic Egypt,” *JSOT*, (in press.).

⁷³ Matthew S. Rindge, “Jewish Identity under Foreign Rule: Daniel 2 as a Reconfiguration of Genesis 41,” *JBL* 129 (2010): 85–86, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27821006>; Michael Segal, *Dreams, Riddles, and Visions: Textual, Contextual, and Intertextual Approaches to the Book of Daniel*, BZAW 455 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016).

⁷⁴ Lachlan Davis, “Reconciliation and Joseph’s ‘Power Over’ His Brothers in Genesis 50:15–21,” in *Figuring the Enemy: Socio-Scientific Approaches to Religious Enmity*, ed. Christopher A. Porter, Elizabeth Shively, and Kenneth Mavor, Routledge Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Biblical Criticism (London: Routledge, 2025).

the novella corrects this table fellowship by emphasising that Joseph “would not eat with the Egyptians, for this was an abomination to him” (*JosAs* 7:1).⁷⁵ Second, Genesis records Aseneth as an Egyptian, and appears to show no hesitation in recording her as the “daughter of Potiphera, priest of On” (Gen 41:45). But, in contrast, much of the narrative of *Joseph and Aseneth* is given over to the extended conversion of Aseneth in both confession and taking on of Jewish norms.⁷⁶ Indeed, as Chesnutt argues:

the milieu [of Joseph and Aseneth] was one in which Jews lived in dynamic tension with Gentiles and struggled to maintain a distinctive Jewish identity; one in which table fellowship and intermarriage with Gentiles, including even marriage between a convert to Judaism and a born Jew, were live issues.⁷⁷

It is in this context that the author[s] of *Joseph and Aseneth* present a romantic novella to extol perceived normative behaviour for the diaspora community,⁷⁸ and provide a pattern for social identity negotiation in a diaspora Jewish enclave within the Egyptian – and later Greek – empire. Indeed, it is this form of social identity negotiation which is picked up in the Danielic narratives.

Before we turn to the Daniel narratives, there is another narrative which is worth examining as a contemporaneous engagement of duelling Empires. The death of Alexander the Great – arguably an Emperor, despite his self-proclamation as merely a King – instigated a period of intra-Imperial controversy and conflict, and efforts to capitalise on his legacy began shortly after his death in Nebuchadnezzar’s palace in Babylon.⁷⁹ Ptolemy I Soter took advantage of the sudden death by hijacking the funerary cart and diverting his body to Alexandria in Egypt, entombing it there as a sign of Ptolemaic legitimacy throughout their reign.⁸⁰ In addition to the possession of Alexander’s physical remains, the Ptolemies capitalised on the supposed existence of a Will that Alexander left in his dying days, promulgating it encompassed within the propagandic work *Liber de Morte Alexandri* (*LM*). Almost certainly originating in Ptolemy I Soter’s court about 309 BCE, *LM* recounts Alexander’s last days.⁸¹ As noted, it includes

⁷⁵ H. F. D. Sparks, ed., *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan*, (323 BCE – 117 CE), HCS 33 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 208.

⁷⁶ Randall D. Chesnutt, *From Death to Life: Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth*, JSPSup 16 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 263; Lawrence M. Wills, ed., “The Marriage and Conversion of Aseneth,” in *Ancient Jewish Novels*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 122, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195151429.003.0006>.

⁷⁷ Chesnutt, *From Death to Life*, 254.

⁷⁸ Jill Hicks-Keeton, *Arguing with Aseneth: Gentile Access to Israel’s “Living God” in Jewish Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 23.

⁷⁹ See Theocritus 17.20–27.

⁸⁰ Diodorus Siculus, *Bib. hist.* 18.28.2–6); John Holton, “The Reception of Alexander in the Ptolemaic Dynasty” (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 96, 101.

⁸¹ A. B. Bosworth, “Ptolemy and the Will of Alexander,” in *Alexander the Great in Fact and*

the fiction (*LM* 115–122||*Ps.-Callisth.* III 33) that Alexander left instructions for the succession to his empire, with the tract apparently circulating in Egypt before entering the Pseudo-Callisthenes tradition in Alexandria and is appended to all versions of the Greek *Alexander Romance*.⁸² As a propaganda piece, through the presentation of Ptolemy as a fuzzy category exemplar, the *LM* seeks to legitimize him as Alexander's preferred successor.⁸³

Furthermore, the *Liber de Morte* centres around a narrative (*LM* 90–95)⁸⁴ which any reader of the apocalyptic sections of Daniel should find oddly familiar.⁸⁵ As the narrative goes, Alexander is slumbering in his Babylonian chambers when a peasant woman, following traditional Babylonian practice, bursts in with a peculiar birth-omen (*izbu*):⁸⁶

[90] ... This had the following shape: the upper part, down to the loins, was that of a boy; the lower was encircled by the fore-parts of wild animals – those of a lion, then a wolf, third a panther, fourth a dog and, fifth, a wild boar – so that the entire figure looked very much as <Scylla> does in paintings. [91] The animals, <however>, were alive while the body of the boy was completely dead and livid.

As one would expect, this terrifies Alexander (92), who seeks mantic wisdom from the local magi and Chaldeans who appear under the threat of death and seek to placate the king by claiming it was a favourable omen. However, one mantic is late to the court, a foreigner named Phippus, who “At the sight of the freak he cried out at the top of his voice, at the same time ripping his clothes and tearing out his hair with both hands in lamentation at the sight of so great a king and a man of such qualities at the very end of his days” (*LM* 93). Unsurprisingly this further petrifies Alexander, who seeks additional explanation from Phippus, who expands:

Phippus sighed deeply. “Ah, your Majesty,” he said, “one cannot count you among the living – your body has practically left the mortal plane.” Asked the reason for this remark, he replied: “Oh greatest of mortals, mark my words. This human portion which you see, that is you; the things you see which look like wild animals are the savage and barbarous peoples under your rule. Now, if the human part were alive, you would have power over

Fiction, ed. A.B Bosworth and Elizabeth Baynham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 207–41; Elizabeth Baynham, “A Baleful Birth in Babylon: The Significance of the Prodigy in the *Liber de Morte* – An Investigation of Genre,” in *Alexander the Great in Fact and Fiction*, ed. A. B. Bosworth and Elizabeth Baynham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 242–62.

⁸² Baynham, “Baleful Birth,” 260.

⁸³ Baynham, “Baleful Birth,” 228.

⁸⁴ Trans. from Waldemar Heckel and J. C. Yardley, ed., *Alexander the Great: Historical Sources in Translation* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 282–83.

⁸⁵ For an extended examination of this narrative in context see Porter and Porter, “Of Monsters and Men”; and Porter and Porter, “Daniel in the Land of the Oniads: Reading ‘Babylonian Tales’ in Ptolemaic Egypt.”

⁸⁶ Erle V. Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu*, TCS 4 (Locust Valley, NY: J. J. Augustin, 1970).

them; <but ...> just as these animals are the enemies of mankind, so the people you have around you are <your> foes, and in a short while your death will bring about a change in the power structure of the world" (LM 94).

At this Alexander "despairing of his life after that" (LM 95) resigns himself to his fate and supposedly authors the Will that divides up his empire between the "wild animals" of the *izbu* (LM 115–122), including Ptolemy I Soter as a significant imperial heir. Even in this short piece of Ptolemaic propaganda we can see elements of social-category construction at work, legitimising the Ptolemaic rule on the basis of the supposed Will, along with building normative features of the Babylonian death into the Greek imperial context.

8.1 Subversive Social-Category Construction and Empire

However, this becomes even more pointed if we consider the canonical court tales of Daniel, and not only their inheritance of the Joseph ingroup narrative, but also in interaction with the imperial Ptolemaic propaganda of the diaspora. As Merrill Willis and Tawny Holm observe,⁸⁷ the final composition of the Daniel text was likely formed in a Jewish diaspora context and therefore fingerprints of a diaspora social-category construction are evident within the final text. The first of these comes with the inevitable comparison of Daniel with Joseph, as a mantic diviner in the employ of a foreign – imperial – court, with many scholars drawing out the comparisons of Daniel 2 and Genesis 41.⁸⁸ Within these intertextual comparisons we find a social-category narrative that not only reinforces diaspora Jewish identity, but also seeks to illuminate a prior identity constructive narrative in a new context – qua *Joseph and Aseneth* as we have seen. These parallels between Joseph and Daniel are plethora – and easy to identify – such as appearance (Gen 39:6||Dan 1:4), divine favour (Gen 39:21||Dan 1:9), mantic wisdom (Gen 41:28–32||Dan 2:36–45), and a subsequent position of power (Gen 41:43||Dan 2:48), along with many more; and provide an audience with a plethora of diaspora Jewish norms to inherit and inhabit.⁸⁹

However, in addition to normative fit characteristics, the Daniel narrative also provides a series of dissonances as it transforms and contrasts with the Joseph narrative. Like *Joseph and Aseneth* we find a rejection of food offered by the court, to prevent ritual defiling (לְאַזְרָעַ; Dan 1:8),⁹⁰ and presents comparative fit for those who had adopted food norms centred around the Josephic narrative.

⁸⁷ Holm, *Of Courtiers and Kings*, 477; Merrill Willis, "A Reversal of Fortunes," 21.

⁸⁸ Ringe, "Jewish Identity," 85–86; Segal, *Dreams, Riddles, and Visions*.

⁸⁹ For more on Daniel as a Joseph revivdus in a diaspora imperial context, see Christopher A. Porter, "Hic Sunt Dracones' Mapping the Rebellious Social Dynamics of Bel and the Snake from the Daniel and Joseph Competitive Court-Tales," *BTB* 51 (2021): 78–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107921997107>.

⁹⁰ Segal, *Dreams, Riddles, and Visions*, 22.

Other points of comparison present Daniel as a superior figure to Joseph, such as his mantic ability not requiring the dream to be told to him before he was capable of divulging its meaning (Dan 2:9, 26 cf. Gen 41:17–27), which is made explicit as coming in the context of prayer and divine petition (Dan 2:20–23), as opposed to merely a declaration of divine origins (Gen 41:16),⁹¹ and even Daniel's superiority as being venerated even by Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2:46), as opposed to Joseph who is venerated by all *except* Pharaoh (Gen 41:40).⁹² Thus, in the competitive court tale genre – which seeks to elevate and highlight the superiority of the hero against other mantics within the imperial court – Daniel is presented not only in inter-group comparative form as a mantic superior to the Chaldeans, but also as an intra-group normative exemplar superior to Joseph. When read within an Egyptian context, this second intra-group comparison becomes particularly salient as Joseph was likely already a salient normative exemplar for the Jewish Egyptian diaspora interacting with its Imperial context.

Indeed, the compilation of these tales may have stemmed from the waves of refugees and self-declared exiles,⁹³ who poured into Egypt during and after the Antiochene crisis. The impact of these migrations on the Egyptian-Jewish community would have been profound. According to Barclay,

it is unlikely that those who retained their ethnic identity could observe the Jerusalem saga dispassionately. The trauma of these years and the fresh waves of immigration must have done much to heighten the national and political consciousness of Egyptian Jews even if they differed in their judgments on the figures currently in power in Judaea.⁹⁴

While the tales assure the émigrés that life in the service of Ptolemy VI is eminently manageable, they also warn that idol worship and scheming courtiers are realities that must be dealt with. Indeed, fidelity to God may require the fortitude of a Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach or Abednego. It may also, however, lead to the king's conversion – as per Nebuchadnezzar.

Therefore, through this comparison with Joseph the Danielic author builds a new set of identity resources to present an even more normative character, along

⁹¹ Ringe, “Jewish Identity,” 93.

⁹² Segal, *Dreams, Riddles, and Visions*, 50.

⁹³ Jerome (*In Danielem* 11.13–14) notes that “countless multitudes of Jews fled to Egypt on the occasion of Onias’s pontificate, and the land was filled with a large number from Cyrene as well. For Onias affirmed that he was fulfilling the prophecy written by Isaiah: ‘There shall be an altar of the Lord in Egypt, and the name of the Lord shall be found in their territories’ (Isa. 19:19)” (transl. Archer, 1958: 125). See also See too Victor Tcherikover, “Jewish Apologetic Literature Reconsidered,” *EOS* 48 (1957): 2–3; Aryeh Kasher, *The Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 7 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985), 9–10; Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 35–36; John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora*, 2nd ed., The Biblical Resource Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 68–69.

⁹⁴ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 35.

with a host of examples of court interactions with imperial power. Therefore, in its simplest form, the Danielic court tales not only give the reader mechanisms to build a robust social identity as an imperial subject but also correct perceived weaknesses in prior social-category exemplars used for the same purpose. The figure that the reader receives is of a Daniel who is a prototypical exemplar for a Jewish diaspora social identity: normatively he follows food laws (Dan 1:12; 16), prays regularly towards Jerusalem (Dan 6:6; 10), and ascribes all things to God (Dan 2:20–23); along with significant comparative fit with surrounding culture in confronting the regent as needed (Dan 4), decrying the desecration of the temple objects (Dan 5:17–23), and his three friends refuse the worship of the golden idol (Dan 3). All of these acts give both a positive identity construction for the diaspora, while also presenting a resistance to empire by subtly subverting the imperial system of the court.⁹⁵ While Joseph may be seen to be functioning within the system – and indeed elevating it – for the diasporic benefit, Daniel – and his friends – live in the system to subvert it from within.

8.2 Daniel's Dreams and The Dream of Empire

However, the Danielic court tales aren't the total extent of this diasporic interaction with empire. As we have already introduced, the Ptolemaic imperial pretence was based upon a court tale of their own, the *izbu* birth presented to Alexander as a death omen and his subsequent – spurious – will. The Danielic court tales present a host of parallels and contrasts with the *Liber de Morte Alexandri*, to such a degree which suggests direct influence and interaction.⁹⁶ The degree of concealment of this counter-imperial transcript is rather thin.⁹⁷ These include the similarity of the broader narrative as a court tale, a regent presented with an enigma, who summons the “magi and Chaldeans” to interpret under threat of death, but are saved at the eleventh hour by a diaspora foreigner who reveals the portent as heralding the doom of the empire, which nonetheless yields praise from the regent. Additionally, along with the general contours, the *LM* finds parallel with the apocalyptic dream sequences of Daniel through the introduction and interpretation of the *izbu* – birth omen.⁹⁸ Here, the

⁹⁵ Alexandria Frisch, *The Danielic Discourse on Empire in Second Temple Literature*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 176 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 101.

⁹⁶ Ioannis M. Konstantakos, “Death in Babylon: Alexander and the Fatal Portent («Alexander Romance» III 30),” *Eikasmos* 26 (2015): 259–68; Ioannis M. Konstantakos, “The Alexander Romance, Folk Narrative and Pseudo-Historical Fiction” (European Cultural Centre of Delphi, 2017), 13–19.

⁹⁷ This is somewhere between the public transcript, and the veiled transcript as described by Heilig. Christoph Heilig, *Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul*, WUNT II/392 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 54.

⁹⁸ Paul Porter, *Metaphors and Monsters: A Literary Critical Study of Daniel 7&8*, ConBOT 20 (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1983), 15–29.

counter imperial narrative speaks loudly, with the series of wild beasts emerging from the sea categorically paralleling those of the birth omen with the pattern of fuzzy category construction aids in the parallelism between the two sets of *izbu*. Here, a lion, bear, leopard and boar according to Julius Valerius (*LDM* 90 (“Scylla”) || *Dan* 7:2) – are all subsequently destroyed by fire, and are all interpreted by a mantic advisor as enemies of the human figure and portend subsequent upheavals of the empire and death of the regent.

Yet, lest we consider Daniel as simply a parallel – responsive – narrative to the *LM*, there are a series of disjunctions which drive contrast with the Ptolemaic imperial propaganda. While most of these are not particularly remarkable – and examined in detail elsewhere⁹⁹ – one is particularly apt for our investigation into empire. As Djurslev observes:

the eschatology in both omen and prophecy suggests different endings: the omen story predicts the upcoming war, whereas the vision of Daniel promises a positive outcome of the earthly empire’s fall (*Dan* 7:18).¹⁰⁰

However, here the contrast is surely deliberate. Daniel’s vision presents a triumphant “son of man” figure rather than a dead child, in effect envisioning an optimistic future for the Jewish diaspora, even in exile. One where the Son of Man is regent over “an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away” (*Dan* 7:14), in contrast to the infighting and temporary nature of Imperial authority.¹⁰¹ This apocalyptic presentation within the context of Daniel heightens the audience’s social categorisation interactions with their surrounding empire, even as it presents a teleological identity separate to the present political reality. Readers following along with Daniel’s apocalyptic visions are provided with a counter-Imperial social-category narrative to follow, identifying with Daniel as prototypical exemplar, as he envisions a new empire to come, separate to the state power that they experience.

8.3 Apocryphal Daniel – Antagonism and Empire

Despite these relatively overt identity formative mechanisms displayed by the parallels with both the Josephic narratives and the *Liber de Morte Alexandri*, it would appear that some authors wished to capitalise on these existing formative efforts by extending the figure of Daniel in other contexts. In a similar fashion to that of *Joseph and Aseneth* a series of additions to received Daniel have been penned, which include another set of three court tales compiled into a brief novella known as *Bel and the Dragon*. By extending the court tale trope, the

⁹⁹ Porter and Porter, “Of Monsters and Men.”

¹⁰⁰ Christian Thrué Djurslev, “Four Beasts and a Baby: The ‘Baleful Birth’ Omen of Alexander’s Death in Its Hellenistic Context,” *Mnemosyne* 74.1 (2020): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568525X-12342743>.

¹⁰¹ Porter and Porter, “Of Monsters and Men,” 347.

author of *Bel* directly focuses on questions of idolatry within a diaspora Jewish identity engagement.¹⁰²

The first tale in *Bel* describes a conflict between the exemplary hero – Daniel – and the priests of Bel, set in the reign of Cyrus the Persian – contemporaneous with Daniel 10. The character contours of Daniel here are consonant with that of the earlier court tales, with Daniel in a position of power, refusing to worship idols, and subsequent conflict over of Daniel's authority within the court – setting him apart as an diaspora-group member. When the priests of Bel maintain that their idol is a “living god” as he consumes food and drink (Dan 14:6), Daniel sets up a test by scattering ashes throughout the temple after the libations had been offered, under the jurisprudential witness of the regent (14:14). As the narrative continues it is revealed that the libations are indeed consumed, albeit by the priests and their families who enter via a secret door (14:19–21), therefore the idol is destroyed, and the guilty parties are executed.

The second – shorter – narrative is another food-based court contest, regarding the serpent that the “Babylonians worshipped” (14:23), which Daniel eviscerates by feeding it cakes composed of pitch, fat, and hair (14:27). Given that eviscerated serpents can hardly be divine, the explosion of the idol is taken as a revelation of the superiority of Daniel's God, whom the Babylonian out-group accuse the king of worshipping (14:28). It is this accusation of conversion to Judaism that sets up the third narrative – which broadly parallels Daniel 6 – as, under threat of revolt, the king hands over Daniel for apparent crimes to the Babylonian cultic apparatus to be thrown into the lion's den. In an escalation of Daniel 6, the addition retells the narrative by including Habakkuk who is angelically helicoptered in – by his hair – with a meal he was preparing to sustain Daniel in Babylon (14:33–39). Daniel survives for seven days, and after a period of mourning when the king finally arrives at the den, he finds Daniel alive and well. This too is ascribed to Daniel's God, and the king retaliates against the antagonists by casting them into the den where they are eaten (14:42).

Thus, the Daniel of *Bel and the Dragon* extends the social identity construction that canonical Daniel engages in. While canonical Daniel presents an exemplary figure who is mainly passive and responsive in the public court – although is significantly active in private and in prayer (Dan 9–12) – the Daniel of *Bel* is an active protagonist in the court contests. *Bel's* Daniel engages in conflict and competition with the Babylonian priests, ostensibly through his own ingenuity, and with minimal divine intervention.¹⁰³ The additions present an exemplar for diaspora identity construction which embodies an active resistance to empire, all the while maintaining a high degree of acculturation and positional power.

¹⁰² Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World*, Myth and Poetics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 132.

¹⁰³ Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World*, 151.

While Daniel of the canonical court tales subverts the system from within, the Daniel of *Bel* is a confrontational and adversarial actor with empire – presenting a strong comparative fit with the imperial system. It is worth noting that this is not merely limited to *Bel*, but also appears in some of the Old Greek variants of the canonical narrative. As Meadowcroft observes of the OG expansion of Daniel 4's condemnation of Nebuchadnezzar, the “attitude towards the king is more adversarial”¹⁰⁴ than the MT and appears to seek to legitimate the Jewish diaspora community.¹⁰⁵

From these engagements we can see how the sublimated social-category construction of Joseph has been modified – and indeed internally confronted – by the recasting apparent in Daniel – in interaction with the *Liber de Morte Alexandri*, and used as a means of casting a subversive identity structure. However, it would appear that this was insufficient for some identity auctors who have recast Daniel as an active anti-imperial antagonist, in *Bel and the Dragon*. Furthermore, the diaspora social-category construction becomes even more complex if we consider the possibility that both OG and LXX Daniel represent a secondary degree of intra-Jewish identity construction, as pro-Oniad propaganda of Leontopolis origin which also seeks to call into question the legitimacy of the Hasmonean temple structure in Jerusalem in a post-Antiochus IV context.¹⁰⁶ Throughout the layers and interactions of normativity and comparativity we can observe the challenges of categorisation and contextualisation for a diaspora audience, and the ways that narratively described prototypical exemplars are utilised as means of navigating these constructs.

9 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter we have examined some of the complexity of considering empires through a socio-cognitive lens. From the challenge of wrestling with varied social groups and how they fit together within an empire, we then turned to Social Identity Theory and Categorisation as a meta-theory approach to social interaction. From here we returned to our consideration of empire, and then finally to examining two complex sets of texts that present varied social-category challenges depending on the audience and context. Social Identity Theory is presented here not as a singular approach, but rather as one aspect of a toolbox which can fit together with – and often unify – other tools such as semiotics, narrative explorations, and many of the other approaches found in this

¹⁰⁴ T. J. Meadowcroft, *Aramaic Daniel and Greek Daniel: A Literary Comparison (Greek Daniel)* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 55.

¹⁰⁵ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 215.

¹⁰⁶ See Porter and Porter, “Daniel in the Land of the Oniads: Reading ‘Babylonian Tales’ in Ptolemaic Egypt.”

volume. Overall, SIT gives us a structured approach to examining social groups, and to expressing the instinctive patterns of social group interaction and differentiation which we naturally identify within research contexts.

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Historical Psychology

Fear of the Empire and Its Opposites

Nils Neumann

How do the population of the Roman Empire in the 1st century CE and, especially, early Christians usually feel towards the emperor and the representatives of the Roman administration? Do they fear them, admire them, hate them, or even despise or disdain them? And what kinds of behavior will usually result from such emotional stances? Due to the interdependence of emotions and behavior, a person's affective state may play a significant role in ethical decisions. The aim of the present chapter is to explore how the Roman ruler feels affectively and accordingly acts towards his subjects, and also how the subjects, in turn, feel and thus act towards the ruler.

Ancient and modern discussions of the topic often assume that the induction of fear is an effective means for an ancient emperor to control the people and secure his position. Some authors even claim that 1st-century emperors decisively create a “culture of fear”¹ by the way they organize their official functions. Will it not be likely that fear as a means of governance provokes criticism? Raising questions like these first and foremost demands a methodological reflection: How can we even know anything about what early Christian individuals or entire communities experienced internally? – This is where Historical Psychology comes into play.

1 What is Historical Psychology?

The urge to approach the phenomenon of emotions in the New Testament in a scholarly manner can hardly be surprising, given the broad presence of emotional vocabulary in early Christian writings. Fraternal love (ἀγάπη) dominates large parts of the discourses in 1 John and 1Cor 13, but also in the fare-

¹ Such is the argument in Eleanor Cowan's analysis of Dio Cassius' characterization of Augustus' successors in the middle of the 1st century. Cf. Eleanor Cowan, “Cassius Dio and the Julio-Claudians: Fear and Loathing in the Early Principate,” in *Brill's Companion to Cassius Dio*, ed. J. Majbom Madsen and A. G. Scott (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 276–301, e.g. 288, 293. See also Eduard Lohse's remark on fear as predominant way of experiencing the world in antiquity in Eduard Lohse, *Umwelt des Neuen Testaments*, GNT 1, 8th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 171.

well discourse in the Gospel of John,² while the Gospel of Luke makes frequent references to joy (*χαρά*).³ Yet, negative affects, such as desire (*ἐπιθυμία*), anger (*όργη*), pain (*λύπη*), and zeal (*ζῆλος*) occur widely in the New Testament, too. Obviously, early Christian communities address emotional phenomena as a matter of course. Not only that, but these emotional phenomena sometimes also determine early Christian ethics, notions of God, or Christology essentially. Anger, for example, can be seen as a strong impulse exerting a vast influence upon God's (e.g., Rom 1:18; Rev 14:10) or Jesus's (Mark 3:5) actions, or the behavior of members in the Christian community towards one another (Matt 5:21–22).

Biblical scholarship of the past was very hesitant to engage in the interpretation of such emotional aspects of the New Testament texts because of the prevalent opinion that emotions are a matter of subjectivity and hence cannot be analyzed neutrally and objectively.⁴ Only in the last third of the 20th century did sporadic attempts emerge that approached the topic in scholarly ways. Historical Psychology is one of these. Differently from other approaches that use Depth Psychology or other modern psychological theories as a methodological framework and backdrop in order to explain emotional dynamics in Early Christianity, Historical Psychology focuses solely on the realm of the past. The reason for this decision is that the way individuals experience certain emotions is shaped by social conventions. As societies change, conceptions of emotions also undergo changes over time.⁵ This insight fosters Historical Psychology's reluctance to explain ancient writings against the backdrop of modern theories: We cannot know if ancient people experienced and conceptualized their world, feelings, and bodies in the same way as modern contemporaries do. One of the early advocates of Historical Psychology in New Testament exegesis, German scholar Klaus Berger, thus boldly claimed that he had no clue about modern Psychology and that this was an advantage in doing research on emotions in early Christian literature.⁶

² On love (*ἀγάπη*) in the New Testament, cf. Oda Wischmeyer, *Liebe als Agape: Das frühchristliche Konzept und der moderne Diskurs* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015). Also, cf. Ruben Zimmermann, *Die Logik der Liebe: Die "implizite Ethik" der Paulusbriefe am Beispiel des 1. Korintherbriefs*, Biblisch-Theologische Studien 162 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2016).

³ On joy in Luke, cf. Anke Inselmann, *Die Freude im Lukasevangelium: Ein Beitrag zur psychologischen Exegese*, WUNT II/322 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); Julie Newberry, *Lukan Joy and the Life of Discipleship: A Narrative Analysis of the Conditions that Lead to Joy According to Luke*, WUNT II/583 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

⁴ Cf. Nils Neumann, "Thinking about Feelings: The Study of Emotions in the New Testament Writings," *Religions* 15 (2024): article no. 752, 4–5.

⁵ See Neumann, "Thinking about Feelings," 5.

⁶ Klaus Berger, *Historische Psychologie des Neuen Testaments*, SBS 146/147 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1991), 35. Cf. Nils Neumann, "Affektive Reaktionen auf Gottes Plagen und Gericht in Offb 18,1–19,10," *BN* 109 (2021): 101–29, 102.

A number of sources from the ancient Greco-Roman sphere, ancient Judaism, and Early Christianity give insights into ancient ways of conceptualizing emotions: Works of philosophy – Aristotle and Stoicism most prominently – reflect on the rationality or irrationality of emotions. Rhetorical treatises offer techniques that enable the speaker to arouse the emotions of their audience and explain why it is useful to stimulate emotional reactions in order to achieve rhetorical aims. Writings of ancient medicine develop theories on the bodily processes that accompany emotional experiences. And finally, a huge number of narrative texts describe individuals or groups feeling pain, fear, desire, or pleasure, situating such emotions within a larger context of characteristic circumstances, weaving them into the texture of narrated events.

Since all these sources display an amount of overlap as well as disagreement, it is helpful to discuss dependencies and developments by means of motif criticism. This does, however, still leave room for a deeper understanding of the social structures, conceptualizations, and individual functions of specific emotions in the ancient world. One approach that has proved immensely helpful in identifying the deep structures underlying specific emotions in antiquity is the analysis of “emotional scripts.” This method was developed by classicist Robert A. Kaster for the analysis of emotional dynamics in ancient Roman culture, but it is applicable to the Hellenistic, Jewish, and Christian spheres as well.⁷ Kaster observes that, according to the ancient sources, emotions are typically contextualized within a characteristic pattern that includes:

- a specific constellation of persons,
- within given social structures,
- events triggering emotional responses,
- sense perception and (possibly) cognitive reflection,
- as well as behavior resulting from the emotional experience.

By identifying such emotional scripts, Kaster gains helpful insights into the deep structure of emotional states in ancient cultures.⁸ For the purpose of understanding imperial fear in the New Testament world, it is thus helpful to reflect on fear scripts from the ancient Hellenistic world before turning to empire criticism in general and in the New Testament in particular.

2 Ancient Scripts of Fear

In discussing emotions in the ancient Greco-Roman world, it is striking that the relevant sources usually consider human emotions dangerous. As the Greek and

⁷ Robert A. Kaster, *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8.

⁸ See also Neumann, “Thinking about Feelings,” 6.

Latin key terms πάθος and *adfectus* suggest, an emotion is something a person suffers from; emotions can be seen as an exterior power that tries to control a person against his or her will. Recognizing this basic assumption, it is adequate to use the descriptive term “affect” rather than “emotion” when dealing with emotional phenomena in the ancient world.⁹ Stoic philosophy most prominently underscores the dangerous character of the affects and develops strategies to control all affective impulses by means of rational thinking.¹⁰ According to the Stoic philosopher Zeno,

passion, or emotion (τὸ πάθος), is defined ... as an irrational and unnatural movement in the soul, or again as impulse in excess (Diogenes Laertius 7.110 [Hicks, LCL]).

Accordingly, Stoic philosophers aim at avoiding affective impulses and consider themselves wise men when they achieve complete freedom from all affects (Diogenes Laertius 7.117). Examples of such affective responses that consequently lead to human actions without prior cognitive reflection can be found in battle narrations most prominently: When a warrior finds himself in an inferior position with no hope of success, the perception of this situation results in fear and immediately causes him to flee. In Homer’s Iliad, “to fear” in these contexts is used in the sense of “to make somebody feel afraid” and functions as a synonym for “to put to flight” (e.g., Homer, Il. 16.583; 22.11).¹¹ Sense perception triggers the warrior’s fear and makes him run without the impulse having to pass through a cognitive filter.

The teachers of Rhetoric, however, accept the fact that most people are not Stoic sages. A speaker’s audience will not only be responsive to affective impulses but will also tend to act according to these affects. The appeal to the addressees’ affects is thus a very powerful rhetorical means, causing the texts to dedicate broad attention to the phenomenon. Within this context, Aristotle – differently from the Iliad – represents a conception of fear that bears a strong reflexive element: A person perceives the situation, reflects on it, understands what is going on, and only then reacts in an affective manner on the basis of the preceding evaluation. This overall pattern applies to most affects in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, and in the case of fear, the author specifies it by the following definition:

⁹ Similarly, Anke Inselmann suggests to use the word “passion” for ancient contexts. See Anke Inselmann, “Emotions and Passions in the New Testament: Methodological Issues,” *BI* 24 (2016): 536–54, 539.

¹⁰ Also, cf. Daniel Kapust, “On the Ancient Uses of Political Fear and its Modern Implications,” *JHI* 69 (2008): 353–73, 357. According to the Stoic system, there are four main affects, structured by the oppositions of present and future on the one hand and good and evil on the other, namely pain (directed at present evil), fear (future evil), desire (future good) and pleasure (present good). Cf. Diogenes Laertius 7.110.

¹¹ Cf. LSJ, 1946; see also David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 316 n.12.

Ἐστω δὴ φόβος λύπη τις ἡ ταραχὴ ἐκ φαντασίας μέλλοντος κακοῦ φθαρτικοῦ ἢ λυπηροῦ.

Let fear be defined as a painful or troubled feeling caused by the impression of an imminent evil that causes destruction or pain (Aristotle, *Rhet.* II.5.1 [Freese, LCL]).

The definition implies a complex set of knowledge, observations, and evaluations that has to be present before fear can arise. Aristotle explicates this in the subsequent paragraphs: Fear occurs in very specific situations, namely in situations of acute threat. A person must observe and evaluate their own situation and come to the conclusion that they will likely suffer pain or destruction soon. This prospect of imminent harm induces fear, demarcating the characteristic Aristotelian script of fear.¹²

Aristotle contextualizes fear for the most part within interpersonal relations. Since natural disasters or accidents might also cause pain or destruction, they are hard to foretell, so they do not provoke the expectation of imminent harm. Accordingly, fear usually arises in constellations of human interactions. Persons we are afraid of, Aristotle explains, must comprise two major qualities: First, they must be willing to do us harm, either because they are hostile, angry, or unjust in nature. And secondly, they must possess the power to do us harm because it would be easy to protect ourselves against those who are not strong (see *Rhet.* II.5.1–11). Fear thus arises in conflict scenarios and necessarily includes an evaluation of power relations and social status.¹³ If a hostile person is more powerful than oneself, then he or she should be feared, according to Aristotle's fear script.¹⁴

Ancient authors frequently explain the nature of specific affects by grouping them in contrasting pairs.¹⁵ In Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the opposite of fear is confidence (θάρσος), because it occurs not when a person expects imminent pain, but on the basis of a prospect inducing hope that something salutary is near (μετὰ φαντασίας ἡ ἐλπὶς τῶν σωτηρίων ὡς ἐγγὺς ὅντων, *Rhet.* II.5.16). Plato, on the other hand, contrasts fear and courage, dedicating an entire philosophical dialogue to the subject (Plato, *Laches*). Against the background of these overall insights on fear scripts in the ancient world, it will now be possible to turn towards the question of how far fear dominates the interrelation between the emperor and the people in the 1st century CE.

¹² See also Kapust, "Ancient Uses," 357.

¹³ Cf. Konstan, *Emotions*, 132–33 and 140–41.

¹⁴ On fear in Aristotle, cf. esp. Konstan, *Emotions*, 131–32.

¹⁵ See also David A. deSilva, "The Strategic Arousal of Emotions in the Apocalypse of John: A Rhetorical-Critical Investigation of the Oracles to the Seven Churches," *NTS* 54 (2008): 90–114, 102; Neumann, "Affektive Reaktionen," 115–16.

3 The Good Emperor in Seneca (*Seneca, De Clementia* I.12)

A treatise that deals with the emperor's fear and the people's fear of the emperor at length is *De Clementia* by Roman philosopher Seneca. In the early 50s CE, Seneca serves as educator and counselor of young Nero, who would be enthroned in the year 54, writing *De Clementia* in order to prepare the prince for his reign.¹⁶ As the title indicates, Seneca is mainly concerned with the phenomenon of mercy (Lat. *clementia*) and uses fear only as a contrasting foil. This opposition between mercy and fear is contextualized within the larger juxtaposition between a good ruler and a tyrant. Seneca argues that only the tyrant has to secure his position by inducing fear within the people, whereas the good ruler carries out the duties of his office mercifully. This idea of the wise and good emperor takes up Plato's notion of the ideal philosopher-king as described in book 6 of the *Republic* (see esp. Plato, *Resp.* VI.1–4).

Over the course of his treatise, Seneca develops a description of good and bad rulers that mainly frames good and bad governance within the system of social hierarchies. Due to this context, what can be said about a good ruler also holds for a god on the large scale and for a *pater familias* on the small scale. Each of them possesses power over a group of people due to his superior position and is supposed to use this power wisely. According to *De Clementia*, mercy is closely connected to superiority, since a king or prince faces many opportunities to experience mercy because he is in a superior position above so many others (I.3.3).¹⁷

Standing in the tradition of Stoic philosophy, Seneca has a hard time arguing that mercy should be seen as a virtue.¹⁸ Stoics usually count affects that pity others under the undesirable affects, because this affect, too, leads to irrational behavior.¹⁹ It is thus not surprising that among ancient thinkers the conviction would be plausible that a king should never act out of pity, because it could make him treat his subjects with undeserved benevolence or even prevent him from executing just punishment against wrongdoers. In Stoic view, a king must judge solely on the basis of rational thinking. Seneca, on the other hand, shares basic Stoic convictions but still wants to argue that a certain mildness in the king's behavior is desirable. He escapes this conflict by differentiating between

¹⁶ Cf. Stefan Krauter, "Mercy and Monarchy: Seneca's *De Clementia* and Paul's Letter to the Romans," *NovT* 63 (2021): 477–88, 479.

¹⁷ Similarly, anger is also closely linked to social status in ancient thought: Since anger arises in persons when they do not receive the respect they deserve, individuals of higher social status will find more occasions to get angry than individuals of low status. The more people owe them respect, the more likely it becomes that their expectation is eventually violated. Cf. also Susan Wessel, "A Comparative Study of Anger in Antiquity and Christian Thought," *Journal of Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity* 2 (2020): 40–49, 42–43.

¹⁸ Similarly Krauter, "Mercy," 479 and 482.

¹⁹ See David Konstan, *Pity Transformed* (London: Duckworth, 2001), 48.

mercy (*clementia*) and pity (*misericordia*), declaring pity the undesirable and irrational affect that a king should free himself from, whereas mercy is a rational and virtuous attitude. The author explains this at length in the second book of his work but highlights the virtuous character of *clementia* right from the beginning of book I. Mercy is a virtue because it prevents others' misfortune and brings peace (I.5.3–4). In so doing, a merciful reign secures the emperor's rule and stabilizes the order of the state (see I.24–26). Underscoring the rationality of *clementia*, Seneca proves that it stands in accord with reasonable thinking. Hence, mercy is a kingly way of interacting with one's subjects. Women and wild animals, on the contrary, are led by irrational impulses such as rage and anger. The king, on the other hand, must not display cruelty and rage (I.5.5–6). Here, it becomes clear how closely Seneca connects mercy, virtue, and social status, seeing wisdom and virtue as a characteristic of a superior social position.

Accordingly, the gods, representing wisdom, virtue, and superiority most perfectly, serve as exemplars of this rationally merciful behavior,²⁰ and the prince should follow their example (I.5.7). Seneca explores the theological topic of the merciful gods even deeper by emphasizing the necessity of divine mercy towards the earth's population due to human failure. Since no human is free from guilt, everyone depends on the gods' *clementia* (I.6–7).²¹ The insight into this divine and thus superior attitude and behavior serves as motivation for the ruler to act according to *clementia* as well in Seneca. A further and somewhat different exemplar of merciful government can be seen in the reign of Nero's ideal predecessor and great-great-grandfather Augustus, who underwent a development from juvenile anger to wisdom and mercy later in life (I.11.1) and is thus adequately considered a god by future generations (I.10). In the later course of book I, Seneca parallels the merciful behavior of kings and rulers with a parental attitude towards children. Since the emperor is interested in the welfare of his subjects as is the father in the welfare of his children, the emperor can be called the *pater patriae* (esp. I.14.1–2; I.16.1–2). Even slaves, Seneca argues, should be treated moderately by a good master (I.18.1).²²

In order to gain a more nuanced picture of a good and merciful rule, Seneca juxtaposes the merciful attitude he wants to encourage with fear in *De Clementia* I.12. Obviously, he addresses a prevalent misconception of sovereignty that assumes an emperor can secure his power by inducing fear in his subjects because

²⁰ On divine mercy or pity in antiquity, see Konstan, *Pity*, 109.

²¹ Stefan Krauter has convincingly pointed out the similarity between this treatise and Paul's argument in Romans 1–3. See Krauter, "Mercy," pass.

²² In Stoic manner, Seneca employs an image from nature in order to prove his point: Among the bees, he says, every individual in the state works diligently for the good of the entire system. The king, however, being the most powerful in the bee kingdom, does not himself possess a sting (I.19.2–3). This implies that a merciful reign under the absence of cruelty secures a most successful rule.

they would not dare to disobey or rebel against him if they are afraid of punishment. This, Seneca argues, is not true, which can be seen from the short time spans of violent rule in the past. Those who use fear and unjust violence to protect themselves against others just reveal their cruelty and must be considered tyrants. Their attempts to stabilize their reign through violence and fear must necessarily fail, but the good ruler, on the other hand, successfully governs his people because the people respect and honor him due to his goodness, which guarantees true safety and protection for the ruler's reign (I.11.4; also see I.19.8–9).

It is, however, true that even the good emperor has to lead wars and carry out executions, Seneca admits. But the difference between the good ruler and the tyrant lies in the motivations of such violent actions. While the tyrant kills out of thirst for blood, the good emperor always has the welfare of the state in mind (I.12.1–2). Because of this, the good emperor can count on the loyalty of his subjects and counselors, whereas the tyrant turns even friends into enemies by his unjust violence and, in doing so, destabilizes his own reign.²³

Interim, hoc quod dicebam, clementia efficit, ut magnum inter regem tyrannumque discrimen sit, uterque licet non minus armis valletur; sed alter arma habet, quibus in munimentum pacis uititur, alter, ut magno timore magna odia compescat, nec illas ipsas manus, quibus se commisit, securus adspicit.

Meanwhile, as I was saying, it is mercy that makes the distinction between a king and a tyrant as great as it is, though both are equally fenced about with arms; but the one uses the arms which he has to fortify good-will, the other to curb great hatred by great fear, and yet the very hands to which he has entrusted himself he cannot view without concern (Seneca, *De Clementia* I.12.3 [Basore, LCL]).

For the tyrant, this dynamic makes his position more and more frail over time and forces him to act even more rigidly and violently:

Nam cum inquis sit, quia timeri vult, quia inquis est.

For since he is hated because he is feared, he wishes to be feared because he is hated (I.12.4 [Basore, LCL]).

This ultimately causes a tyranny to fail, whereas the good king can exert his authority successfully. By the juxtaposition of king and tyrant, as well as fear and mercy, Seneca establishes a clearly defined script of fear in imperial rule that consists of the following recurring elements (Table 1):

²³ In the early 3rd century, Cassius Dio goes even one step further by depicting a model of tyranny in which the ruler creates a situation that urges him to be afraid even of his counselors because of his violent rule. Cf. Cowan, "Cassius Dio," 281.

Table 1: Recurring elements in Seneca's script of fear in imperial rule.

<i>A good ruler</i>	<i>A tyrant</i>
feels secure about his superior position, → is not afraid of others → and can afford to show his people mercy; → people honor him due to his goodness → so that he reigns successfully in peace.	feels insecure about his social position, → fears being attacked by others, → and shows violent behavior; → people fear him due to his terror, → but he governs himself into a self-perpetuating spiral of violence.

As shown, the crucial factor in these scripts is social superiority or subordination. The ruler as well as his subjects must be assured that the king not only possesses superior power but is also willing to use it for the welfare of the state.²⁴ Implicitly, Seneca claims that major problems occur if the social structure is not clearly established, or, more precisely, if the ruler fails to establish his superior position successfully. Only merciful behavior is suited to achieve this goal, whereas the unjustly violent tyrant disqualifies himself and actively damages his own position.²⁵

The same logic also applies to the community between the *pater familias* and the members of his household on the one hand²⁶ and to the interaction between the gods and humans on the other hand, as Seneca writes. Interestingly, Philo of Alexandria offers a very similar argument in his discussion on why humans should obey God's commandments in his work *On the Unchangeableness of God*. In the tradition of Stoic philosophy, Philo takes umbrage at the numerous biblical places that mention God's affects like wrath or jealousy and God's body parts like his face or hand. Such descriptions serve an educational purpose only for the uneducated, Philo argues. The wise readers of the Torah know pretty well that God does of course not fall under the restrictions of human existence that accompany a physical body. And surely God will by no means behave irrationally, says Philo, repeatedly underscoring the qualitative difference between God and man by quoting "God is not as a man" (*οὐχ ὡς ἄνθρωπος ὁ Θεός*, Deus Imm. 53, 62, 69; referring to Num 23:19 or Jdt 8:16). But an anthropomorphic notion of God turns out to be useful for the uneducated who cannot understand the difference. For them, the misconception of God leads to the positive effect that they obey the Torah because they fear God's punishment (also see Deus Imm. 52).²⁷

²⁴ In the reception history of the interaction of Seneca and Nero, Cassius Dio couches this point even more explicitly, having Seneca tell Nero he does not have to be afraid of his subjects as long as he is sure to be their superior. Cf. Cowan, "Cassius Dio," 296.

²⁵ Cf. Kapust, "Ancient Uses," 370–71.

²⁶ In the New Testament the so-called household codes implicitly make use of a similar argument (esp. Eph 5:21–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1).

²⁷ On love as a motor of ethical behavior in Philo, see also Somn. 1.163. Cf. Berger, *Historische Psychologie*, 175. On fear as motor of good deeds in antiquity, see also Stefan Krauter, *Studien zu Röm 13,1–7: Paulus und der politische Diskurs der neronischen Zeit*, WUNT 243 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 237.

The wise readers, on the contrary, obey the commandments due to their love of God, as Philo concludes his train of thought:

τὰς γὰρ διὰ τῶν νόμων εἰς εὐσέβειαν ὥρῳ παρακελεύσεις ἀπάσας ἀναφερομένας ἡ πρὸς τὸ ἀγαπᾶν ἡ πρὸς τὸ φοβεῖσθαι τὸν ὄντα. τοῖς μὲν οὖν μήτε μέρος μήτε πάθος ἀνθρώπου περὶ τὸ ὄν νομίζουσιν, ἀλλὰ θεοπρεπῶς αὐτὸ δί' αὐτὸ μόνον τιμῶσι τὸ ἀγαπᾶν οἰκειότατον, φοβεῖσθαι δὲ τοῖς ἔτεροις.

“For I observe that all the exhortations to piety in the law refer either to our loving or our fearing the Existent. And thus to love Him is the most suitable for those into whose conception of the Existent no thought of human parts or passions enters, who pay Him the honour meet for God for His own sake only. To fear is most suitable to the others” (Philo, *Deus Imm.* 69 [Colson and Whitaker, LCL]).

Note that, as in Seneca, fear and honor also form a contrast in this passage. Only a tyrant or a misconceived god will be feared by his subjects or worshipers, while they will honor a good king or a god whose true nature they have recognized.²⁸ By encouraging young Nero to organize his rule in a god-like manner,²⁹ Seneca pursues his pedagogical goal.

Excursus on Rom 13:1–7: Against the backdrop of this overall ancient discussion about the qualities of good and bad rulers, it is telling that Paul, in his argument about obedience towards the imperial authorities in Romans 13:1–7, ends the paragraph in a somewhat open manner. He does not postulate: “Fear and honor the emperor at all times” or something of the like, but uses wording that urges his addressees to evaluate precisely who is worthy of receiving fear or reverence. Like Seneca, Paul presents the ruler as a good ruler who uses his power not unjustly or cruelly, but in order to guarantee safety and stability for the state, which is best for all individuals. By the remark that the emperor receives his position from God (Rom 13:1),³⁰ Paul refers to the same complex hierarchy of powers that can also be found in *De Clementia*. So, the emperor’s reign stands under the signature of God’s superior power, demanding that the emperor use his position justly and wisely.³¹ When Paul concludes that everybody should pay their tribute and taxes to whom they owe them (v. 7), it is clear that only the empire can claim to take in tribute and tax money. This clearness blurs in the last two members of the catena: Paul’s readers are also supposed to give fear (φόβος) and honor (τιμή) to whom they owe them. Within the overall topic of obedience against the worldly authorities, the signal words “fear” and “honor” bring up the discussion of good rule and good behavior of the subjects. Although the first verses of the paragraph suppose that Paul’s addressees will find themselves under the rule of a good em-

²⁸ On the fear vs. love or honor juxtaposition in Early Christianity, see also Berger, *Historische Psychologie*, 174–77.

²⁹ On the parallel between the ruler and the gods, see also Krauter, “Mercy,” 487.

³⁰ Paul calls the political rule ἐξουσία in Rom 13:1. On the meaning of ἐξουσία in the present context, see Krauter, *Studien*, 175.

³¹ Accordingly, only individuals who behave in an evil manner have to be afraid of the political rule, whereas those who do good deeds can feel safe. Cf. Peter Arzt, “Über die Macht des Staates nach Röm 13,1–7,” *SNTSU.A*18 (1993): 163–81, 170. Thus, the discourse in Rom 13:1–7 uses a similar juxtaposition of good and bad as Seneca, but focusing on the subjects instead of the ruler.

peror, the wording still stimulates them to evaluate the ruler's and their own qualities. Only evildoers have to fear the good ruler according to Paul (Rom 13:4). In Seneca, fear and honor form a contrast. Likewise, Paul's readers have to ask themselves if they can honor the emperor because he leads a just and wise reign, or if they have to fear him because he is a tyrant. Should a ruler abuse his power and act cruelly, his good subjects cannot honor him out of fear. From the perspective of the Christian readers of Romans 13, it is clear that they have to make a decision if an emperor expected them to behave in ways that compromise their loyalty to God. Due to God's merciful reign, believers must show him their reverence, as Philo argues. Thus, Paul bases his train of thought on the assumption that the emperor leads a just and merciful reign and can expect his subjects to honor him accordingly, while still allowing for the possibility that a tyrant rules cruelly and, in so doing, loses his right to be honored. If a subject fears the ruler, at least one of them does a bad job. Accordingly, whenever fear dominates the relationship between the ruler and the subject, this demands for evaluation of the situation in order to spot the problem.³² The argument of Romans 13:1–7 does not have to implement some kind of "hidden transcript"³³ but simply makes its point within the framework of ancient discourses on well-used power.

In general, the ancient sources broadly reflect on the fact that ancient kings and rulers oftentimes stimulate their subjects' fear by exerting their power violently. Seneca, however, challenges the opinion that this might be an indicator of successful kingship, postulating the emperor's mercy and the subjects' reverence as markers of a good reign.³⁴

4 Pilate, the Torn Governor (John 18:28–19:16)

The question of fear and good kingship also underlies the depiction of Pilate in the Gospel of John. Scholars have noted for a long time that the text sequence that ends with Jesus's death sentence (John 18:28–19:16) features a striking literary structure, because the setting of the events steadily oscillates between the outside and the inside of Pilate's official residence. Inside the praetorium, Pilate primarily interacts with his captive Jesus, while on the outside, he interacts with the Judean crowd who want to see Jesus crucified.³⁵ Commentator Ernst

³² Christoph Heilig comes to a similarly nuanced conclusion with respect to the appraisal of imperial power in Rom 13:1–7. See Christoph Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire: Paul's Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome*, with a foreword by John M. G. Barclay (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 113 and 116.

³³ See esp. Laura Robinson, "Hidden Transcripts? The Supposedly Self-Censoring Paul and Rome as Surveillance State in Modern Pauline Scholarship," *NTS* 67 (2021): 55–72, 72 on the problems of this concept.

³⁴ Collective fear of a foreign enemy, on the other hand, is considered helpful for the achievement of political goals in several ancient sources. See Kapust, "Ancient Uses," 360–61.

³⁵ Accordingly, the group on the outside of the praetorium functions as a stereotype, representing the rejection of Jesus's messianic claim in John. Cf. Manfred Lang, *Johannes und die Synoptiker: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Analyse von Joh 18–20 vor dem markinischen und lukanischen Hintergrund*, FRLANT 182 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 128. The

Haenchen has called this seesaw style of composition a “dual-stage technique”,³⁶ consisting of seven steps (Table 2):

Table 2: The structure of John 18:28–19:16 according to Ernst Haenchen.

1. 18:29–32 (outside): the accusation
2. 18:33–38a (inside): the question of Jesus’s kingship
3. 18:38b–40 (outside): the “king of the Judeans” and the outlaw Barabbas
4. 19:1–3 (inside): the Roman soldiers flogging and ridiculing Jesus
5. 19:4–7 (outside): the question of Jesus’s innocence
6. 19:8–12 (inside): Jesus’s and Pilate’s power
7. 19:13–15 (outside): the sentence

With respect to Historical Psychology and imperial fear, a number of aspects in the overall text sequence are striking. Firstly, the narration brings up the question of kingship, power, and loyalty in a multifaceted manner.³⁷ Several times, Pilate addresses Jesus by the messianic title “king of the Judeans,” the first instance taking the form of a question: “Are you the king of the Judeans?” Pilate asks (18:33), starting the dialogue with Jesus inside the praetorium. The protagonists discuss this topic extensively on their first encounter. Jesus claims that he represents an otherworldly kingdom and has come to give witness of the truth.³⁸ The scene ends with Pilate asking “What is truth?” (v. 38), not knowing that Jesus has introduced himself earlier in the farewell discourse as being the truth (John 14:6).³⁹ Interestingly, Pilate still addresses Jesus as “king of the Judeans” (18:39) later on, although he states that he has not done anything wor-

Gospel of John connects this aspect of rejection not so much to the addressees’ Jewish faith but rather to their location in Judea, because Jesus finds much more favor with his Jewish addressees in Galilee. Because of this observation I have decided to translate the Greek word *Ἰουδαῖοι* by “Judeans” and not “Jews” in this text passage. See also Steve Mason, “Das antike Judentum als Hintergrund des frühen Christentums,” *Zeitschrift für Neues Testament* 37 (2016): 11–22.

³⁶ Ernst Haenchen, *Das Johannesevangelium: Ein Kommentar* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1980), 544. On the analysis of the literary structure, see Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation*. (SNTMS 100; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. 169; Lang, *Johannes*, 116–19; Beate Kowalski, “Was ist Wahrheit?” (Joh 18,38a): Zur literarischen und theologischen Funktion der Pilatusfrage in der Johannespassion,” in *Im Geist und in der Wahrheit: Studien zum Johannesevangelium und zur Offenbarung des Johannes sowie andere Beiträge*, ed. Konrad Huber and Boris Repschinski, NTAbh 52 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2008), 201–27, 216. Further, see Frey, “Jesus,” 362–63.

³⁷ See also Frey, “Jesus,” 385.

³⁸ Cf. Kowalski, “Wahrheit,” 217–18. On the different conceptions of kingship in the Johannine passion narrative, see also Frey, “Jesus,” 360.

³⁹ The contrast creates an instance of Johannine irony. Also cf. Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 179; Lang, *Johannes*, 154. On the Christological dimension of the motif of truth in John in general, see Kowalski, “Wahrheit,” 214.

thy of condemnation (v. 38), implying that he has understood that Jesus, despite considering himself a king, does not plan to rebel against the empire or claim any political power for himself. In an ironic manner, even the entire cohort of soldiers⁴⁰ who carry out the lashing call Jesus “king of the Judeans” (19:3).⁴¹ The Judeans outside the praetorium, in contrast, refuse to adjudicate any kingly dignity to Jesus by confessing their loyalty to the emperor (19:15; also see v. 12).

Jesus’s royal dignity, although being an otherworldly quality, aligns with the discourse on power. The governor’s power is *ἐξουσία*, a quality that he does not possess out of himself but a power that he has received from a higher place.⁴² The last dialogue with Jesus inside the praetorium begins with Pilate’s question, “Where are you from?” (19:9). The governor does not know what readers of the gospel know right from the beginning: that Jesus has come from the heavenly sphere (see 1:1–18). And the farewell discourse has emphasized again and again Jesus’s close relationship with the father and the fact that now Jesus is about to return. In the dialogue with Pilate, Jesus now states that the governor has received his *ἐξουσία* from above. In the overall Johannine context, the formulation “from above” accordingly has a multifaceted meaning. Of course, Pilate’s power is one he has been given from a higher-ranking person (19:11). Without the knowledge of the preceding narrative, it would be natural to assume that Pilate received his position as provincial governor from the emperor and thus represents Rome’s power in Judea. In the Gospel of John, however, the word “from above” (*ἄνωθεν*) is connected to God’s heavenly might in a striking manner (esp. 3:31), so that the readers understand that Pilate ultimately owes his power to God.⁴³ By bringing up the topic of power from above, the Johannine Jesus also implies an answer to Pilate’s original question of Jesus’s origin (cf. again 3:31).

Sitting on the judgment seat, Pilate refers to Jesus as a king for the last time (19:14, 15), implying once more his conviction that Jesus is innocent of the accusation, yet still deciding to crucify him (19:15–16). The discussion of contrasting power structures thus shapes the entire sentencing scene in the Gospel of John, culminating in the portions of the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate.

Secondly, the topic of mercy is strikingly absent on the surface level of the narration, although the narrated events are obviously suited to induce a merciful

⁴⁰ On the hyperbolically large number of soldiers in the scene, see Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 166–67.

⁴¹ Helen K. Bond assumes that the mockery about Jesus dominates the whole sentencing scene. While it is certainly true that the aspect of ridicule is present here, the multiple references to Jesus’s kingship can be interpreted in a twofold manner, underscoring the facts that firstly, Jesus spoils the hopes that he would bring military liberation but that secondly his kingdom is of a heavenly kind. See Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 185.

⁴² With the use of *ἐξουσία* the argument parallels Paul’s discourse in Rom 13:1.

⁴³ Note the parallel idea in Rom 13:1–7. On the dimensions of *ἄνωθεν* in John, see also Frey, “Jesus,” 379.

reaction.⁴⁴ On the one hand, Jesus is not only ridiculed but also treated most brutally by the huge group of soldiers – an entire cohort carrying out the flogging.⁴⁵ Such a violent and extremely shameful punishment is reserved for slaves and opponents of the empire in the 1st-century Roman world, situating the Johannine Jesus on the lowest level of social hierarchy.⁴⁶ But on the other hand, the governor underlines Jesus's innocence several times. Speaking to the Judean crowd in front of the praetorium, Pilate claims that he does not find a reason to accuse Jesus (18:38) and repeats his conviction after the flogging in nearly identical wording (19:6).⁴⁷ As he presents Jesus to the group outside by the words “Behold the man” (ἰδοὺ ὁ ἄνθρωπος, v. 5), the narration directs everyone's gaze directly to the cruelly maltreated body of Jesus.⁴⁸

According to Aristotle, the scene in John 19:6 that graphically focuses on the suffering body of the innocent Jesus would be an ideal occasion to experience mercy or pity (ἔλεος), the unjustly suffering person being the characteristic object of this affect.⁴⁹ Aristotle writes:

ἔστω δὴ ἔλεος λύπη τις ἐπὶ φαινομένῳ κακῷ φθαρτικῷ ἢ λυπηρῷ τοῦ ἀναξίου τυγχάνειν, ὃ καν αὐτὸς προσδοκήσειν ἀν παθεῖν ἡ τῶν αὐτοῦ τινα, καὶ τοῦτο ὅταν πλησίον φαίνηται.

Let pity then be a kind of pain excited by the sight of evil, deadly or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it; an evil which one might expect to come upon himself or one of his friends, and when it seems near (Aristotle, *Rhet.* II.8.2 [Freese, LCL]).

Especially in cases where the suffering person holds a similar social status as the observer, the perception of misfortune will induce pity, as Aristotle explains.⁵⁰ As shown above, the Johannine Pilate uses Jesus's title “king of the Judeans” rather positively. The governor may not understand precisely that Jesus is the son of the heavenly God, but he does see that Jesus poses no threat to the empire and hence could be set free. Sharing the conviction that Jesus is innocent, Pilate would have a reason to experience pity under the condition that he considers Jesus close or equal in social status. He does, however, decide not to set Jesus free in the end, although he undertakes several attempts to do so.

And third, the governor does experience fear and takes his decision on the basis of this affect. In Aristotle, pity (ἔλεος) and fear (φόβος) are closely related,⁵¹

⁴⁴ Differently Frey, “Jesus,” 375.

⁴⁵ Cf. Frey, “Jesus,” 373.

⁴⁶ See Garrett G. Fagan, “Roman Violence: Attitudes and Practice,” in *The Prehistoric and Ancient Worlds*, ed. Garrett G. Fagan et al., vol. 1 of *The Cambridge World History of Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 550–71, 564, and also Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 182–83.

⁴⁷ Cf. Frey, “Jesus,” 369.

⁴⁸ The view underscores Pilate's attempt to set Jesus free. Cf. Lang, *Johannes*, 168.

⁴⁹ Cf. Konstan, *Pity*, 34.

⁵⁰ On the complex interrelation of pity and social status in antiquity, see esp. Konstan, *Pity*, 50.

⁵¹ On the parallels, see Konstan, *Emotions*, 131.

fear being the affective response to the prospect of imminent harm to one's own person, whereas pity is the affective response to the observation of present harm to another. Against the backdrop of this dichotomy, it becomes evident that Jesus and Pilate stand in a contrasting juxtaposition in the Johannine sentencing scene: In showing no pity but fear, Pilate proves that he is concerned more with protecting himself against imminent misfortune than advocating justice for the innocent Jesus. The governor's fearful behavior is based on the structure of imperial hierarchies: Interestingly, the first time Pilate's fear is mentioned is in his reaction to the Judeans' accusation that Jesus has declared himself the son of God (19:7). Before, Pilate has already come to the understanding that Jesus is not dangerous in the political sense, but now that the crowd insists on Jesus's guilt, the governor becomes "afraid even more" ($\mu\ddot{\alpha}\lambda\lambda\omegaν \acute{e}φοβήθη$, v. 8),⁵² implying that he has felt at least uneasy already before. The concept of friendship rests upon hierarchical structures at this place, too, becoming clear in the logic of the argument that the Judean crowd applies. If the governor sets Jesus free, the crowd replies, he cannot be the emperor's friend ($\varphi\acute{\iota}\lambda\omegaς τοῦ Καίσαρος$, 19:12). Thus, his actions against Jesus serve as a litmus test of Pilate's loyalty toward the emperor. This does in fact imply that Jesus makes a claim to political power, which is not the case, as Pilate has already found out, but still, the crowd manages to influence the governor's will, accomplishing their goal precisely by stimulating Pilate's fear. The fear of violating imperial hierarchies and thus risking being punished by a higher-ranking authority is obviously big enough to govern political decisions – even if it means that an innocent person must be sacrificed.⁵³ Within this hierarchical system, the crowd possesses the power to make the governor feel afraid of the emperor and consequently act upon his affective state. The Judean crowd in John, however, confesses their loyalty to the emperor alone: "We do not have a king but only Caesar" (19:15).

All in all, Pilate's seesaw movement between the inside of the praetorium and the outside aligns with his affective conflict, torn between pity and fear.⁵⁴ Al-

⁵² Jörg Frey argues that at this place fear might be Pilate's response to Jesus's divine quality. See Frey, "Jesus," 378. It is, however, debatable if the dialogue about Jesus's kingship is special enough to consider these events some kind of epiphany. To my mind, in the context of ancient discourses on affective reactions to imperial power, it is more plausible to assume that Pilate already senses that his position might become insecure due to the disagreement with the Judean crowd about an adequate sentence.

⁵³ In Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, the motif of the crowd's power to manipulate the ruler forms a recurring topic: By stimulating fear in a ruler the public can exert a strong influence on him, so that the ruler may execute political adversaries out of fear even though they do not deserve the punishment. See Cowan, "Cassius Dio," 289. On the crowd's power over the governor in the Johannine narration, see also Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 190.

⁵⁴ Also cf. Kowalski, "Wahrheit," 218–20. The focus on Pilate's present – and also absent – affects thus supports the view that he can be considered a weak character because he is afraid to lose his position and thus cannot afford to steady his rule by showing mercy. On the discussion of Pilate's characterization in John, see also Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 174–75.

though the signal word *ἔλεος* does not occur in the present text sequence, it is evident that the topic of Jesus's unjust suffering cannot be ignored. Fear and pity form conflicting affects within the governor, agreeing with the emotional scripts that can be found in Aristotle's treatise: Fear arises at the realization of imminent danger for oneself, while pity is excited by the sight of another person suffering. What is peculiar in the Johannine narration is that Pilate cannot follow both impulses but has to decide if he either wants to act on his fear and protect his own person and position, or if he can afford to decide justly and set Jesus free. This way, the trial scene becomes a "him-or-me" situation for Pilate in John. One of them – Jesus or the governor himself – will have to face harm or violence, and it is up to Pilate to make the decision. He does, of course, decide in his best interest, acting exactly as a good ruler in Seneca's sense should not. Still, the Johannine narration underscores Jesus's majestic dignity in contrast to worldly conceptions, explaining why the innocent son of God receives his death sentence.

5 Joy and Pain over Babylon's Downfall (Revelation 18:1–19:10)

The Book of Revelation discusses Christian existence and especially Christian loyalty towards God and Christ under the circumstances of social life in the cities of the province Asia during the last decade of the 1st century. The main antagonist of the heavenly realm in Revelation is the city of Babylon, standing under the control of Satan himself (see esp. Rev 13). In the figurative language of the Apocalypse, "Babylon" functions as a code name for Rome,⁵⁵ taking up a motif from the history of God's people Israel and applying it to the historical and political context of the 1st-century Roman empire when the former glory of the Babylonian reign is little more than a bygone memory. In Revelation, Babylon is the "great city" (17:5, 18; 18:2), sitting on seven hills (17:9) by many waters (17:1).⁵⁶ But the text describes her not only as a place but also as a person, identifying Babylon as the "great harlot" (17:2), clad in costly garments of the royal color purple and decorated with gold and jewelry (v. 4). She is both very attractive and very threatening, for on the one hand, she seduces many people to commit adultery with her, teaming up with the most powerful forces on earth and gaining control over the kings of many peoples (v. 2). But on the

⁵⁵ See Claus-Hunno Hunzinger, "Babylon als Deckname für Rom und die Datierung des 1. Petrusbriefs," in *Gottes Wort und Gottes Land*, ed. H. Graf Reventlow (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 67–77, esp. 71; Michael Durst, "Babylon gleich Rom in der jüdischen Apokalyptik und im frühen Christentum: Zur Auslegung von 1 Petr 5,13," in *Petrus und Paulus in Rom: Eine interdisziplinäre Debatte*, ed. S. Heid (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2011), 422–43, esp. 429.

⁵⁶ On the obvious allusions to Rome, see Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse*, HTS 48 (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 66 with n. 13.

other hand, she spoils her allies, impurifying them, so that the Christian community is supposed to keep away from her according to the author of Revelation. This Christian reluctance calls forth her aggression, and she is eager to shed the blood of “the saints and Christ’s witnesses” (v. 6), getting drunk on the blood of her victims.⁵⁷

What makes the situation even more complicated is the fact that some Christian preachers in the Asian congregations do not see an issue in respecting the political system and in giving reverence to the emperor in particular. The seer John polemicizes against them in the letters to the seven churches (Rev 2–3) by calling them the names of biblical villains like Balaam (Rev 2:14; cf. Numbers 22–24; see also Jude 11; 2 Peter 2:15–16) and Jezebel (Rev 2:20; cf. 1 Kgs 16:29–33). These evil people whom Revelation does not even consider true Christians seduce the members of the seven churches to commit adultery and eat food offered to idols. Obviously, not all Christians in the Asian communities advocate a lifestyle that isolates as strictly from the regime and from emperor worship as does the seer John. Because of this ongoing conflict with disputes within the churches and perceived pressure from the overall society, Revelation characterizes the present situation as a crisis. It is, however, debatable how dangerous it actually is for late 1st-century Christians in the province to confess their faith publicly and refrain from occasions like festivals in the emperor’s honor. No evidence exists of systematic prosecution of Christians in the last decade of the 1st century,⁵⁸ although it is probable that Christians would get in trouble if they decided to criticize the empire or the ruler too offensively.⁵⁹ The letters to the seven churches mention one member of the church in Pergamon named Antipas who lost his life due to his Christian conviction (Rev 2:11), but this case is clearly considered an exception. Accordingly, Revelation reflects a perceived crisis⁶⁰ and emphasizes the dramatic aspects of the present situation in order to achieve its rhetorical aim, applying the motif of fornication that is common in prophetic literature (Hos 1–2; Ezek 23) to the present conflict in the Asia.⁶¹ From the seer’s point of view, being a member of the Asian urban society with its prevalent culture poses a threat to a person’s faith towards God. Emperor worship becomes a test case of Christian loyalty. Those who pay respect to the emperor prove unfaithful towards God and Jesus Christ according to Revelation. The last book of

⁵⁷ Cf. Rossing, *Choice*, 85–86.

⁵⁸ Cf. F. Gerald Downing, “Pliny’s Prosecutions of Christians: Revelation and 1Peter,” *JSNT* 34 (1988): 105–23.

⁵⁹ Laura Robinson, too, sounds a note of caution with respect to the assumption that early Christians are in danger of political prosecution. In her article she mainly focuses on the Pauline letters. See Robinson, “Hidden Transcripts?,” 57.

⁶⁰ Cf. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 84–110.

⁶¹ On fornication or prostitution as an image of idolatry, see also Rossing, *Choice*, 69.

the Bible delivers its message through apocalyptic rhetoric, establishing a dualistic worldview and inducing fear of the empire or eschatological catastrophes in combination with fear of God's judgment in order to make its Christian audience isolate themselves from the political system. As in other apocalyptic texts, too, fear serves as a "pedagogical" means here.⁶²

Revelation's discourse on fear and the empire culminates in Rev 18:1–19:10. Having introduced Rome or "Babylon" as the personified great harlot in chapter 17, Revelation 18 describes the judgment over the great city and her destruction as well as several reactions to the judgment scenario. The paragraph mentions Babylon's glory and her high social status several times. She sits on a throne as a queen (18:7), wearing precious garments of linen and purple (v. 16). However, according to the apocalyptic evaluation, she just uses her attractive outer appearance to lure others into her sphere of influence and commit fornication with them. Against all those who want to elude her influence, she resorts to violence, killing the prophets and saints who remained faithful to God alone (v. 24; see also v. 20). Because of her rage (v. 3), bloodshed, and murderous violence (v. 24), the great city deserves God's judgment. Divine mercy would be inappropriate in her case because she is altogether evil; and thus the judgment comes in the form of death, sorrow, hunger, and fire (v. 8), creating a characteristic war scenario (cf. 17:14).⁶³ Within a very short time, the formerly great city is destroyed, and all her glory is gone. By the repetition of signal words like "plagues" (πληγαί, vv. 4, 8) or "torture" (βασανισμός, vv. 7, 10, 15), the text emphasizes the fact that this judgment means revenge for Babylon's evil deeds: Now, she has to suffer the pain that she inflicted on others before.

A large portion of the paragraph is dedicated to the descriptions of the lamentations of groups of Babylon's allies. All those who lead a prosperous life before due to their affiliation with the great harlot now express their pain over the loss that deprives them of the basis of their wealth. Kings, merchants, and seamen cry out lamenting the great city's downfall.⁶⁴ The triplet structure of lament in Revelation 18 displays a recurring scheme, offering variations of four main aspects:

- The text names the groups of Babylon's allies: kings (v. 9), merchants (v. 11), seamen (v. 17),
- who are standing afar [due to their fear of her torture] (vv. 10, 15, 17),
- lamenting and crying (vv. 9, 15, 19),
- saying: "woe, woe, the big city", and addressing the decline of her wealth (vv. 10, 16, 19).

⁶² On the induction of fear and other affects in apocalyptic rhetoric, see Meghan R. Henning, *Educating Early Christians through the Rhetoric of Hell: "Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth" as *Pai-deia* in Matthew and the Early Church*, WUNT II/382 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 224–27.

⁶³ See also Rossing, *Choice*, 90.

⁶⁴ Cf. Rossing, *Choice*, 106.

The use of dust that the seamen throw on their own heads (v. 19) in addition to woes and loud cries adds to the ritual character of this behavior. In ancient Roman society, these are typical expressions of a person's pain over the loss of an important or dear person.⁶⁵

But pain over the loss is not the only affective reaction to Babylon's destruction that her affiliates show. Kings (v. 10) and seamen (v. 15) also experience fear at the sight of the city's suffering. As already shown, ancient fear originates in the prospect of imminent harm. In Revelation, the perception of Babylon's dramatic fate causes pain in those who depend on her; but the realization of their own imminent doom due to their alliance with the city causes fear. Seeing Babylon's downfall induces the apprehension in her rich allies that they might soon lose their lives in a painful manner, too. By the threefold repetition of the specific mourning scheme, the text highlights the fear that results from a state of dependence on the empire, since God's mighty judgment will triumph over Babylon's short-term glory.

Strikingly, lament is not the only possible reaction to Babylon's downfall and torture in Revelation. While on the one hand, those who have made a profit from the alliance with her mourn; those who had to suffer under her violent rule, on the other hand, can now rejoice. One and the same judgment scenario thus evokes two kinds of altogether different affective responses, forming a stark contrast. Using the imperative "be merry!" (*εὐφραίνου*, 18:20), the text calls for a cheerful reaction to the great city's destruction. It addresses the heavens, saints, apostles, and prophets, informing the persons who resisted the harlot's attraction and remained faithful to God even though they had to suffer under Babylon's rule that the judgment happens on behalf of them (*ἐκρινεν ο θεος το κριμα υμων εξ αυτης*). God's judgment thus compensates for the injustice that the empire's Christian opponents had to face during Babylon's reign and, in so doing, demands a joyful response.

After focusing mainly on earthly reactions to the empire's destruction in chapter 18, the narrated events shift to the heavenly sphere in Rev 19, revisiting a number of motives that were already present in the preceding narrative and developing certain aspects in more depth. The signal formulation "after these events" (*μετα ταῦτα*, 19:1) indicates the beginning of a new section that stresses heavenly worship as a major response to God's judgment over Babylon. A huge crowd of heavenly beings praises God due to the fact that he has triumphed over the great harlot and, in doing so, avenged all the cruelty that she had

⁶⁵ Cf. Neumann, "Affektive Reaktionen," 110. Such and similar kinds of behavior are often interpreted as rites of self diminution. See Ernst Kutsch, "'Trauerbräuche' und 'Selbstminde rungsriten' im Alten Testament," in *Drei Wiener Antrittsreden*, ed. Kurt Lüthi, Ernst Kutsch, and Wilhelm Dantine, ThSt 78 (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1965), 23–42. However, the sources offer no evidence to support the assumption that individuals lower their own status by showing behavior like this. That is why I prefer to see them as bodily expressions of pain.

brought on his servants (v. 2). Worship vocabulary dominates the whole text sequence in three consecutive utterances, each of which begins with the exclamation “hallelujah!” (vv.1, 4, 6). The heavenly crowd exalts God because of his salvation (*σωτηρία*), glory (*δόξα*), and power (*δύναμις*), that he has shown.⁶⁶ The 24 elders confirm their praise by “Amen! Hallelujah” (v. 4), and a loud voice invites all of God’s servants to join them in worship (v. 5). The third and final doxology combines the call to worship with the motif of joy. Within a poetical parallelism, the words “Let us rejoice and cheer” (*χαίρωμεν καὶ ἀγαλλιῶμεν*, v. 7) form a semantic counterpart to the activity of giving praise – “and let us give him glory” (*καὶ δώσωμεν τὴν δόξαν αὐτῷ*).

The juxtaposition of the two kinds of responses to Babylon’s downfall contextualizes the entire narration within a discourse on hierarchies. The great harlot claims authority and reverence for herself, as does God in Revelation – but the text leaves no doubt that only God’s claim to power is legitimate, whereas Babylon is in an inferior position by far. By laying claim to exaltation that only God deserves, she has invited the divine judgment that settles and clarifies the controversy once and for all in the eschaton. Accordingly, those who have sided with her experience a harsh disappointment, whereas those who were strong enough to resist her claim and attraction can now rejoice.

The affect of joy does not occur in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* as a major topic, but in his discussion of pity and indignation, Aristotle mentions several occasions where a joyful reaction is appropriate. Joy (*χαίρειν*) arises at the observation of an evildoer’s punishment as well as at the experience or perception of deserved fortune (Aristotle, *Rhet.* II.9.4). This view aligns perfectly with the behavior of God’s faithful servants in Revelation, confirming the conviction that their resistance to the imperial system was justified, as was the empire’s destruction. Both the annihilation of Babylon and the salvation from her violence induce joy.

A somewhat related contrast between fear and joy can be found in Cassius Dio’s *Roman History*, where the author brings up the topic of tyranny. The observation of a tyrant killing induces fear in his subjects, Cassius Dio argues, whereas the subjects can rejoice when the tyrant himself is killed.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the death of a good ruler would of course cause a painful reaction in the subjects. Interestingly, as already shown, in Revelation there are groups who do experience pain over Babylon’s destruction and thus mourn at the sight of her torture. The description of the kings’, merchants’, and seamen’s lament is based on the social convention that people are expected to express their pain over the loss of a close person of higher social status.⁶⁸ Thus, ancient sources most often

⁶⁶ Cf. Neumann, “Affektive Reaktionen,” 113.

⁶⁷ Cf. Verena Schulz, *Deconstructing Imperial Representation: Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and Suetonius on Nero and Domitian* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 245–46.

⁶⁸ Cf. Darja Šterbenc Erker, “Gender and Roman Funeral Ritual,” in *Memory and Mourning*:

describe groups of female mourners. But males, too, can be expected to lament if the deceased has an equal or higher rank in the social hierarchy. Since Christian protagonists in Revelation do not lament but rejoice over the death of Babylon, this implies their rejection of her claim to reverence and dominion.

In describing the joyful reactions of the Christian worshipers, Revelation introduces a positive kind of fear in the sense of reverence that is very common in the Jewish and early Christian spheres, namely the fear of God (Rev 19:5).⁶⁹ In ancient Jewish and Christian writings, fear of God oftentimes occurs within the context of epiphanies, demonstrating the immense difference between the divine appearance and mortal humanity that threatens human existence, although God usually does not intend to destroy those whom he reveals himself to.

The Book of Revelation prophesies the empire's downfall in an apocalyptic manner. By juxtaposing two different emotional scripts, the book contributes a powerful argument to the dispute on the legitimacy of Rome's rule in the Asian churches. In the current situation of the Christian audience, the social and political hierarchy of the empire may still seem legitimate, but in his eschatological judgment, God will triumph over it, taking up his kingly reign (βασιλεύω, 19:6) and destroying Babylon's dominion (βασιλεία, 17:18) over all earthly kings. From Revelation's apocalyptic perspective, the call to resist Rome's attraction and remain faithful to God receives its rhetorical force.

6 Conclusion: Alternatives to Fear

Historical psychology offers an approach to explain affective reactions to imperial power within its ancient contexts. As the examples from Seneca, the Gospel of John, and Revelation have shown, a fearful feeling is a very common way of responding to the imperial authorities due to their life-threatening power.⁷⁰ But similarly, the sources also frequently see the motivations of the emperor's and his subordinates' behavior in their fear about the security of their own position in the imperial hierarchy. Fear arises at the realization of imminent pain and harm. Does this mean that the ancient Roman empire is essentially structured by a "culture of fear"? Such a notion would imply the assumption that the emperor and his representatives systematically encourage fear in their subjects by exerting unjust violence; but this cannot be proved to be a consistent pattern, although some authors like John of Patmos or Cassius Dio would probably agree.

Studies on Roman Death, ed. Valerie M. Hope and Janet Huskinson (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2011), 40–60, 40.

⁶⁹ On this motif, cf. Joachim Becker, *Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament*, AnBib 25 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965). On fear or awe in Revelation, see also deSilva, "Strategic Arousal," 101.

⁷⁰ Also see Schulz, *Deconstructing Imperial Representation*, 26–27.

Instead, the texts under consideration criticize the widespread imperial agenda of a violent rule by offering alternatives or showing contrasts. Seneca argues that a good ruler should show his subjects mercy, whereas only a tyrant must be feared. The Gospel of John depicts a provincial governor torn between fear and pity, taking an unjust decision out of his selfish concern to protect his position. And Revelation takes an eschatological point of view that challenges all fear of the emperor due to the very limited duration of the empire's reign.

In the perspective of Historical Psychology, the texts thus allow insights into the multi-faceted evaluations of hierarchies and power in the ancient world. Fear, it becomes clear, being omnipresent in the discourses on imperial power, is not without alternative. Rather, Seneca encourages the emperor to act out his rule mercifully so that the subjects will not have to fear but love him. Early Christian ways of coping with fear of the empire in Johannine literature mainly put the Roman rule in perspective by contrasting its limited ἔξουσία and duration with God's eternal reign and preeminent power. The early Christian writings distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate objects of fear, assessing the empire from a theological point of view. Fear is a bad counselor, whereas mercy identifies a good and successful rule. By focusing on the affective states of rulers and their subjects, the texts under consideration offer criteria that help to discern good rulership from bad.⁷¹

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⁷¹ In my opinion these criteria might also prove helpful in current discourses on political governance of the 21st century. We are observing an increase of populist rhetoric and its effects on large parts of the population, but the New Testament texts oppose such strategies by their message that fear is a bad counselor. Instead, they promote a just and merciful rule and encourage their readers not to be tempted by forms of unjust government. On the hermeneutical relevance of the overall topic see esp. Heilig, *Apostle*, 1–4.

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Hidden Transcripts

Revisiting Paul's Political Theology in Light of Early Christian Social Practices

Laura Robinson

1 Hidden Criticism, Un-Hidden Criticism, Unexpressed Criticism, and Superstition

My contribution intends to advance a conversation I began having with Christoph Heilig in 2021. This is the year I wrote an article called “Hidden Transcripts? The Supposedly Self-Censoring Paul and Rome as Surveillance State in Modern Pauline Scholarship,” published in *New Testament Studies*. I argued that the proliferation of a “hidden criticism” reading of Paul’s letters. By “hidden criticism,” I mean an approach to the texts of Pauline letters that sought to find coded critique of the Empire within them, obliquely started to avoid the attention of imperial officials. This is a theory of Pauline interpretation that largely traces its origins to James Scott’s book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.¹ Scott’s work juxtaposes “public transcripts” with “hidden transcripts.” The “public transcript” for Scott is the official, respectable, dominant, establishment discourse imposed on a society by its ruling classes, which seek to silence other discursive acts that might challenge a dominant narrative. The examples Scott uses, for instance, include the ceremonies and mythologies surrounding national holidays or coronations, which insist on the validity of a ruling class.² By contrast, the oppressed classes in a society may have their own narratives and discourses about how they feel about these cultural constructs, as well as their own ways of resisting public narratives. One method in which resistors do this is through practiced dissembling or secrecy to tell their own stories safely – often in a way that is mistaken for “false consciousness”³ or capitulation, but actually may be a form of discursive disguise and resistance.⁴ Generally speaking, when these theories have been applied to Paul, the argument has gone something like

¹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

² Christoph Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire: Paul's Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome*, with a foreword by John M. G. Barclay (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 47.

³ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 77.

⁴ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 140.

this: Paul performs political respectability and compliance in his letters, but in actual fact, he is, per Scott, “laying it on thick” – performing obedience while quietly indicating dissent for those with ears to hear.⁵ This thesis was explored in Richard A. Horsley’s collection *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*,⁶ but other claims regarding the need to conceal criticism in private correspondence have appeared Brian Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat’s *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* and other similar texts.⁷

I argued in this article that this hypothesis, and thus the hunt for encoded criticism of the Roman Empire in Paul’s letters, was untenable. I argued this for several reasons. First, Rome did not have access to the tools used by modern surveillance states that would allow individuals to police written correspondence. This removes a major motive for writing coded criticism in one’s letters – the letters themselves were unlikely to fall into the hands of Roman officials. Secondly, controlled speech in antiquity tended to focus on specific speech, as in libel suits, or to focus on the speech of individuals with power to threaten imperial rule. Therefore, another motive for coding criticism is removed – the private correspondence of working class individuals was not likely to attract the attention of *delatores*, or self-appointed prosecutors, who would likely be uninterested in the activities of Paul as opposed to members of the senatorial class. Third, the private, inefficient nature of ancient policing made it unlikely that Paul’s letters would be subject to the kinds of prosecution that ancient politicians were most vulnerable to. Fourth, Paul’s legal difficulties, and subsequent execution, can be explained through avenues other than his apparent anti-imperial speech in his letters.

⁵ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 44–59.

⁶ Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*, SemeiaSt 48 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2004).

⁷ Norman A. Beck, *Anti-Roman Cryptograms in the New Testament: Symbolic Messages of Hope and Liberation*, The Westminster College Library of Biblical Symbolism 1 (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 1–2, 17; Neil Elliott, “Strategies of Resistance and Hidden Transcripts in the Pauline Communities,” in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*, SemeiaSt 38 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2004), 97–122, at 117–22; Erik M. Heen, “Phil 2:6–11 and Resistance to Local Timocratic Rule,” *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004) 126–7; William R. Herzog II, “Onstage and Offstage with Jesus of Nazareth: Public Transcripts, Hidden Transcripts, and Gospel Texts,” in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*, SemeiaSt 38 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2004), 41–60, at 49; Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat. *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide*, Abingdon Essential Guides (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 11–13, 12–21, 128–36; Stefan Schreiber, “Caesar oder Gott? (Mk 12, 17): Zur Theoriebildung im Umgang mit politischen Texten des Neuen Testaments,” *BZ* 48 (2004) 65–85, at 70–1; Maria Pasuzzi, “The Battle of the Gospels: Paul’s Anti-Imperial Message and Strategies Past and Present for Subverting the Empire,” *PIBA* 30 (2007) 34–43, at 44.

In response, Heilig dedicated a significant portion of his book *The Apostle and Empire: Paul's Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome* to engaging my article. The bulk of Heilig's book, I must note, is not dedicated to defending the concept of "hidden criticism" as I encountered it in my research. Rather, Heilig is interested in arguing for the presence of "unnoticed criticism" of the Roman Empire in Paul's letters, and a portion of this in the first few chapters of the book involves arguing with my thesis.

In what follows, I will address two questions that I argue were raised by Heilig's objections to my writing. First, was my original thesis actually refuted by Heilig's book? And secondly, as Heilig sought to move the conversation from the realm of "hidden criticism" to "unexpressed" or "unrecognized" criticism, is there an avenue to move the conversation further yet? Namely, when we discuss the Roman Empire's response to Christianity, to what extent were the beliefs and theology of Christians – particularly beliefs regarding the Empire itself – particularly part of Roman concern?

My initial article puts forward a very narrow thesis: Paul had no cause to believe that as a private citizen in a largely non-literate society that his mail would be subject to search and seizure by Roman authorities, nor the contents of his letters used to bring treason charges against him. Thus, Paul's letters need not be searched for coded, anti-imperial messages, because Paul's feelings about the Roman empire likely could have been expressed in a letter without concern that a Roman surveillance state would find and prosecute him for them.

Furthermore, Paul's beliefs about the empire do not need to be invoked to explain Paul's legal troubles. Acts suggests that Paul was repeatedly punished for breaking the peace because of his contentious relationships with synagogue communities and other Christian groups, rather than any particular content in his preaching that was seen as disruptive towards imperial ends (cf. Acts 21:27–36). I did not engage with the broader questions of how Paul may have felt about the Roman Empire, how his theology may have conflicted with imperial claims, or how members of a new religious movement may have moderated their language about the government system it lived under in order to avoid displeasing or alarming neighbors.

This initial thesis was to deal with the fairly straightforward, limited question of criticism disguised out of concern for *surveillance*. In the end, a significant amount of Heilig's response to my own work can be answered with the fact that my article answered a narrow thesis and Heilig's book advances different ones. This, of course, does not preclude the possibility of the two kinds of un-hidden criticism that Heilig engages in chapters three and four of his book. The first kind that Heilig discusses is "unexpressed" criticism, which seems to take two forms for Heilig.

One is that, in some letters, Paul had no need to express his thoughts on the Empire, and Paul had many ideas and beliefs that did not make it into his

letters.⁸ This is both apparent and yet perhaps underappreciated in Pauline scholarship. Yes, Paul the man is not Paul's curated, canonized letters, and yes, we as academics who have access to only Paul's letters are vulnerable to forgetting this. And yet, this does invite the thorny question of how Paul the man, and Paul the thinker, can be reconstructed from both things he said and did not say in his letters. Perhaps there were specific, local situations that Paul addressed in some of his contingent letters in which he responded to matters that were shaped by the imperial cult and politics; one option that Heilig proposes, in line with Bruce Winter, is the establishment of the Imperial Cult of the Achean league as an influence behind 1 Corinthians. Another is the influence of the imperial cult in Galatia as a possible motivator for gentile Christians to be circumcised. What remains tricky, though, is discussing evidence of local circumstances coloring the view of the apostle. To be fair to Justin Hardin, cited by Heilig, he provides a robust historical reconstruction of imperial politics in Judea,⁹ and his hypothesis that gentiles would be likely to blend in as Jews if they became circumcised is at least historically plausible.¹⁰ Still, there is nothing decisive about this argument. Paul does not mention the cult. What he *does* mention is Abraham, which lends some credibility to Barclay's reconstruction of the events behind Galatians.¹¹ The only persecution that is named in Galatians is the persecution in which Paul himself played a major role (Gal 1:13; 1:23), and the persecution that Paul faced (Gal 5:11). This persecution is not specifically located in Galatia, nor is it framed as part of the challenge that the Galatians are presently facing.

The second form that Heilig mentions is the possibility that Paul may have felt the need in some situations to step lightly around issues related to the Empire – specifically, in his letter to Rome, which was written after the expulsion of the Jews from the city. The problem here is that it is remarkably difficult to ascertain a motive for why someone *did not* say something. Yes, it is certainly possible there are situations in which the Empire would have loomed large in Paul's imagination, and yes, many of these seem to have been situations in which Paul responded by *not* writing strident criticism of the Empire and its policies. And yet, how does one actually distinguish between unexpressed criticism and non-existent criticism? I don't think Heilig is wrong for exploring possible motives for keeping one's silence about the Empire, besides fear of a surveillance state. And yet, it seems incredibly difficult to discern from a text why certain content is not

⁸ Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire*, 39–43.

⁹ Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire*, 23–84.

¹⁰ Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: U. California Press, 1999), 175–98.

¹¹ John M. G. Barclay, "Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case," *JSNT* 10 (1987): 73–93. Lack of mention of delayed eschatology in Paula Fredriksen, "Judaism, The Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2," *JTS* 42 (1991): 532–64, is, I think, equally problematic. See also Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 202.

in that text. In the end, all we have is Paul's letters, and his writings in one genre. These are the only windows we have into Paul himself. Using these letters alone we are left to find the difference between hidden criticism, unexpressed criticism, and the absence of criticism. We can surmise about what Paul as an itinerant preacher, diaspora Jew, frequent urbanite, and devotee of a crucified man might have thought about the Empire that shaped all those forces.

The other option Heilig raises is unnoticed criticism, or even incidental conflict. Here the landscape is more promising. Unnoticed criticism primarily concerns those texts where Paul uses imagery associated with the Roman Empire – for example, a Roman triumph – in ways that suggest discomfort with Roman imperial narratives and beliefs. Heilig engages this particularly in chapters three and four. This makes sense to me. Paul may not be explicitly seizing on the opportunity of using the image to rail against Emperor Claudius (he has bigger fish to fry), nor is the language “coded” to evade the scrutiny of those who would see Paul's writing as subversive. Even still, the use of the image does not suggest that Paul was enthusiastic about this sort of pageantry when coming from the Romans, and this fact has gone somewhat unnoticed among historical interpreters. So, this constitutes neither hidden criticism, nor support for imperial rituals, but “unnoticed criticism.” I don't object to this. The second subject Heilig engages is “incidental conflict” – beliefs that Paul held, and recorded, that may not have been explicitly intended to counter imperial narratives, but certainly had this effect. Heilig argues that Paul is actually quite blunt about the ways in which his own ideology conflicts with Roman imperial thought. For example, Paul is understood by Tertullian to be opposed to the worship of idols – which includes emperor worship.¹² Here, Heilig makes the, I believe, reasonable argument that core aspects of Paul's theology were in conflict with prevailing cultural norms, particularly those that ordained what it meant to be a good citizen of the Empire.

This all strikes me as a reasonable expansion of my thesis, if not a refutation of it. Paul's letters probably do not contain coded criticism of the Roman Empire meant to evade imperial ears and eyes. Paul says what he means about worship and idolatry, and some of that material conflicts with larger civic and cultural mores. This conclusion fits very well with dominant historical theories about why the early Christian movement was persecuted at all. Namely, it was persecuted because members refused to participate in civic religion and sacrifices to the emperor.¹³ These beliefs and practices shared among Paul and his fellow Christians may not have been formulated as deliberate flouting of Roman sensibilities, nor were they articulated for the primary purpose of refuting imperial ideology.

¹² Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 48.

¹³ G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?,” *Past and Present* 26 (1963): 6–38.

Nonetheless, Paul's theology came from both the exclusivist Jewish impulse that only one God should be worshiped, as well as the apocalyptic belief that God had acted through a crucified man for the purposes of redeeming the world. Even if Paul was, on the whole, slow to explicitly name the Roman Empire as the one who crucified Christ¹⁴ and demanded idol worship, the implications were clear enough and the consequences were concrete. Eventually, the exclusivist impulses of Christians were seen as anti-Roman enough that they were persecuted for it.

And yet – there is still an element here that, I think, focuses overmuch on the doctrines and words of Paul as the arena of conflict. Of course, this is partly inevitable when trying to interpret Paul's letters and Paul's own theology. Still, is there too much certainty that the details of Pauline theology in particular, and Christian theology in general, were objectionable to the Romans?

I wish to draw attention to the following two paragraphs. This is from my original article:

If we look at our earliest source for Paul's legal trouble, Acts, it seems local officials did not need to know much about what Paul taught in order to find him dangerous. Paul's high-conflict relationship with other Christians, his complicated status in non-Christian synagogues¹⁵ and his mission to bring pagans into monolatrous worship of Israel's God made him a troubling figure already. Paul did not need to be found denouncing the emperor to end up in prison. His conflict with virtually every existing social group outside of his own churches was a problem already. Paul was a frequent recipient of synagogue discipline. He disturbed the peace enough to earn corporal punishment. He made a habit of convincing pagans to abandon their religion and follow foreign gods. Wherever he went, there were riots. When placed in this context, Paul's eventual execution is not a mystery that needs to be explained with anti-imperial codes. Paul was a habitual, highly visible troublemaker, and his letters would not need to be "decoded" to prove that.¹⁶

Here is what I meant. In context, this paragraph is meant to seek for a possible answer for Paul's legal troubles. Contra Walsh and Keesmaat,¹⁷ I do not think the

¹⁴ And yet he may well name them in 1 Cor 2:6–8!. Fee argues that the "rulers of this age" are likely simply those rulers who were involved in the crucifixion of Jesus – namely, Romans and the Sanhedrin and that the ἄρχων is not the same as the ἄρχαι of Col 1:16 and Eph 6:12. See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 103–4, especially n. 24. Thistleton favors the argument that spiritual forces lie behind earthly powers in Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 233–39.

¹⁵ I do not love how I put this since synagogues are by definition Jewish. I believe at the time what I meant was that Paul faced opposition in synagogues where the presence of Christian beliefs and practices were not tolerated, as apparently occurred when Paul received the "forty lashes minus one" (2 Cor 11:24). Acts refers to the presence of Christ-followers in synagogues (e.g., Acts 22:19; 26:11), but the presence of synagogue with significant numbers of Christ-followers as members is fairly scarce in our era. Therefore, a "non-Christian synagogue" is a tautology, and I should not have written that.

¹⁶ Laura Robinson, "Hidden Transcripts? The Supposedly Self-Censoring Paul and Rome as Surveillance State in Modern Pauline Scholarship," *NTS* 67 (2021): 55–72; 70–1.

¹⁷ Walsh and Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*, 54.

best explanation is that Paul's letters and preaching were recognizable as treason. Rather, the better explanation seems to be a pattern of Paul's *habits*. This in itself is not a reason why someone would, or would not code criticism. My interest in this paragraph was unrelated to Paul's motives regarding hidden criticism, or its absence. Rather, the argument is that, on the occasions in which Paul was accused of criminal behavior, the evidence that this was connected to his writings (which – lest we forget, were in letters that were sent to other cities, not in bound volumes he and his fellows carried around with them) is slim.

Here is Heilig in response:

I am not entirely sure how best to enter into a constructive dialogue here. For, in my view, Robinson herself sketches a pretty clear backdrop for why the congregations of Paul should indeed have been very careful not to evoke the impression – be it correct or not – that they might be politically subversive. In other words, it seems to follow in a straightforward way from Robinson's own assessment that we do not need a) a police state with b) very specific limitations on free speech in order to come to the conclusion that a) Pauline churches would have been under a lot of scrutiny and b) everything that could even be (mis)construed as being seditious would have been extremely dangerous for them.¹⁸

Let's compare these two arguments. The general argument of my paper is, in effect, from 1 to 3: 1) Since written language was not often controlled in the Roman Empire, then 2) the earliest Christians could probably say and write what they liked about politics without fear of detection. Therefore, 3) before the Christian movement itself became well-known and disliked by Romans, the causes of state-sanctioned persecution against Christian missionaries likely owed to causes other than specific anti-imperial theological claims that Christians made (especially on paper). As I intend to show below, the act itself of gathering in-groups to celebrate an exclusivist religion was in itself perceived as anti-imperial. This seems to me to problematize any claims we might make about Christians hesitating to write or voice their real thoughts regarding the Roman Empire. If being a Christian is perceived as *inherently destabilizing to social order*, then why would one avoid making certain statements on the grounds that these claims might be *perceived* as being destabilizing to social order? This strikes me a little like arguing that anarchist literature against the United States might contain hidden critiques of the American, because anarchist movements would be under scrutiny. Yes, it is true they would be under scrutiny, and yes, this would impact the behaviors of members. But do movements that *cannot* be made congenial to the broader society generally avoid critiquing it openly? I am not convinced.

For Heilig, the argument goes from items 3 to 1: 1) Since the earliest Christians were socially marginalized and faced with official resistance, then 2) they would have needed to be careful about what they said about the Roman Empire so as not to make their position more precarious. Therefore 3) the earliest Chris-

¹⁸ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 16.

tians would have experienced themselves as subject to linguistic and ideological control.¹⁹

I am willing to accept, well enough, that an individual associated with an unpopular religious movement may make a point of not additionally voicing incendiary opinions. Still, is it possible we have shifted too much from the ground on which Romans viewed their Christian interlopers, to the ground on which we as New Testament readers are more comfortable? Are we still looking to explain early Christian persecution by appealing to what Christians thought about the Roman Empire, instead of what the Roman Empire thought about Christians? What does it mean for a movement that is seen as antisocial – indeed, in key respects, *is* antisocial – to hesitate to state its criticisms of the society to which it is opposed? Why would they do this? Even more importantly, why did Romans see Christians as antisocial? Was it because they understood Christian claims about Jesus and the gospel to be a threat to the Empire? Most constructions of “hidden criticism” in Paul start and end with the assumption that the proclamation of Jesus’s lordship identified a rival claimant to Caesar’s throne.²⁰ Did Rome agree, or was there something else that bothered Rome about Christians that was less specific to Christianity? We are, of course, very familiar with Paul and his language of Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God and the Lord. But were the Romans?

I do not think so. My original article did not engage with the subject of Pliny’s letter to Trajan regarding Christians, but allow me to engage it here. Pliny’s correspondence with Trajan (*Ep. 10.96*) concerning the persecution of Christians postdates the Pauline era. It was probably written around 112 CE – so, fifty years after Paul’s death. Since Paul’s era, circumstances for Christians seem to have changed. For example, the name “Christian” (the Latinism *christianoī*) is now in use, and in particular is in use among Romans. The title of “Christian” seems to be a later term, first attested in Acts (11:26; 26:28), 1 Peter (4:16), and Justin Martyr (*1 Apology* 1.4). The term seems to have been applied from without. Heilig is comfortable using the data from Pliny concerning persecution in Paul’s era by denying that there is a useful distinction between the era before Christianity’s supposed criminalization and after.²¹ To an extent, I agree. Roman anxiety around voluntary associations and superstitions, as we will discuss later, predated Paul and Paul’s churches. Still, I want to be careful drawing a straight line between the political situation in Paul’s day and the political situation in Pliny’s day. The Neronic persecution, attested in Tacitus, is the earliest evidence

¹⁹ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 16.

²⁰ The origins of this assumption make sense based on narratives of Jesus’s execution. Jesus’s crucifixion as “King of the Jews” makes this fairly explicit, as does the statement “We have no king but Caesar” in John 19:15. That said, there is a distinction between Jesus being executed because he was understood to claim authority that rivaled Caesar’s, and Romans remembering Jesus as such a figure. Pliny, for instance, betrays no awareness of Jesus as a historical figure.

²¹ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 330.

we have for a group of Christians who were recognizable as a single, stand-alone movement in Rome – which may have overlapped with the end of Paul’s life. Whether this was the case elsewhere in the Empire, where Paul spent most of his career, is a more difficult question.²² Meanwhile, issues that seem to have defined Paul’s career are unattested in Pliny’s testimony regarding Christians. Since Pliny calls on former Christians to sacrifice to the emperor and use local temples, it seems that Pliny’s Christians are decidedly not Jews, whereas Paul’s fellow missionaries still seem to be overwhelmingly Jewish (Gal 2:15). Likewise, Paul prides himself on preaching in areas where other Christ-followers cannot be found (Rom 15:20), which suggests that Paul was *not* preaching in areas where groups of Christians would have been easily recognizable to authorities. Within fifty years, yes, Christians were recognizable as a gentile movement identifiable by name in the provinces. This does not mean that before this, Romans had no problems with Christians. It does mean that, by the time Pliny writes about it, the presence of the Christian movement in the provinces certainly seems to be better attested than it was in Paul’s day, and as such, has specifically become a target for Rome. Pliny’s letter does give a sense of how anti-Christian sentiments among Romans evolved with time, even if it cannot provide a window into the experience of the first or second generations of Christianity.

Pliny’s questions for Trajan are twofold: to what extent should Christians be investigated, and under what circumstances should Christians be punished – namely, for the name of being a Christian only, or for offenses committed as a Christian (*Ep. 10.96*)? Pliny’s current course is that denounced Christians brought to him are faced with what amounts to a test of sincerity. If a person is willing to make a sacrifice to the emperor and gods, and to curse Christ, they are assumed to not be a Christian presently and the fact that they had been one is immaterial. However, among those who refused to sacrifice and insisted that they were Christians, Pliny thought that their obstinacy alone merited execution (3).

Now, here is what I wish to note. I do not mean that anything Christians said or did other than plotting to overthrow the emperor would have been seen as harmless.²³ Clearly, that was not the case. Pliny would not have executed Christians otherwise. What I do think bears mentioning, though, is that Pliny’s objection to Christianity does not seem to be connected to suspicions of treason or sedition that are tied to Christian theological claims. What Pliny seems to be perceiving as “anti-Roman” about the Christian movement has *very little to do* with the content of specific Christian beliefs. Pliny notes that the Chris-

²² Bart D. Ehrman, “Christian Persecutions and the Parting of the Ways,” in *The Ways That Often Parted: Essays in Honor of Joel Marcus*, ed. Lori Baron, Jill Hicks-Keeton, and Matthew Thiessen, ECL 24 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2018), 283–308; 295–98. Ehrman is also skeptical that the Jews were expelled from Rome owing to rioting related to the growing Christian movement under Claudius.

²³ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 17.

tians sing hymns to Christ, but at no point suggests that the hymns the Christians sing or the claims they make about Christ are a threat to Trajan's authority.²⁴ If Pliny wanted to justify his execution of Christians, and he had evidence that they were proclaiming a king besides Caesar, wouldn't Pliny have said so? The closest that Pliny gets to identifying an anti-Roman belief is refusal to participate in civic worship. However, even this seems to be secondary to the phenomenon of obstinacy. Essentially, a person should be willing to do what the governor tells them to do, and if the governor tells a person to not be a Christian, curse Christ, and worship the gods, they should do it. What I meant in my original article only is that the avenues by which speech and gestures are policed in modern surveillance societies were not available to Romans. As such, the only real evidence we have for speech, correspondence, or philosophical writing controlled for treason seems to come from that class of individuals who were either able to immediately act on such threats (usually aristocrats) or from those for whom it was profitable for a *delator* to denounce. What I do *not* mean is that, because Christians were not plotting to overthrow the empire, that they were not objectionable to the Romans. Christians *were* objectionable to Romans. But why?

Pliny does not seem to attach any significance to the word "Christ." There is no indication he identifies this as a title for a king. Pliny does not seem to have any category for what Christ is except as a divine figure – Christians sing hymns to him as to a god. As with other elements of Christian practice, such as eating together and swearing oaths to not commit certain acts, Pliny does not seem to have any objection to it. It is not at all clear that Pliny perceives Christian belief to be setting up an alternative to imperial rule, or naming a king who rivals Caesar. It is certainly not clear that Pliny thinks the trouble is that Christian language or writing is opposed to his ideals. Rather, he is concerned with *behavior*. The explicit issue is that Pliny has, under Trajan's direction, banned the gathering of unregistered voluntary societies (*Ep. 10.96.7*). Among those who refuse, they are already guilty of a capital offense; defiance of a magistrate is grounds for a capital charge both in Pliny's account and in later martyr acts.²⁵ Christians are continuing to gather, and thus must be stopped for fear of social disruption. Secondarily, based on the oaths that Pliny orders former Christians to take and his conclusion that local temples are seeing an increase of activity, Pliny also believes that individuals should heed the emperor and participate in civic worship.²⁶ Christians discourage participation in these rituals and will not swear by the emperor, which is why this particular political group needs to be disbanded. Besides this, Pliny seems to know very little about Christianity, and what he does know does not seem to particularly alarm him.

²⁴ Thanks to Christoph Heilig for gamely pointing this out to me in private correspondence.

²⁵ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them: Second Edition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 23.

²⁶ De Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?", 6–38.

This, to me, seems to speak against both hypotheses regarding hidden criticism or unexpressed criticism, if the motive for hiding or silencing criticism is fear of drawing attention to one's movement for perceived anti-imperial statements. Statements do not seem to be the problem. Pliny does not object to the content of Christian beliefs, which seems to be exactly why he is so willing to pardon and excuse those who have stopped being Christians. As he notes, the former Christians he excused did not commit any offenses. This would clearly *not* be the case if Pliny believed them to be part of a revolutionary movement.

To compare this to a relatively contemporary source, let's also look at Tacitus. Tacitus is aware of Jesus's execution under Pilate. However, Tacitus does not dwell much on the idea that Jesus was a revolutionary, nor does he particularly ascribe this label to Christians. Tacitus's narrative assumes that Christ's movement was briefly quashed under Pilate, but then the *superstition* spread again in Judea and eventually made its way to Rome. Tacitus then says that the Christians were not primarily arrested because they were understood to be arsonists, but because of their "hatred of the human race" (*Annals* 15.44). The connection between Christ as crucified rebel, Christ as messianic object of devotion for Christians, Christianity as a seditious movement, and Christianity as an *objectionable* movement all seems rather tenuous. The problem with Christians is not clearly that they claim a king besides Jesus, or because they are fierce critics of the Roman Empire. It is because they are part of a *superstition*, and because they are understood to be a misanthropic movement.

So all this raises a question where perhaps Heilig and I are talking past each other, or perhaps we are actually disagreeing. If something offended the Romans about Christians, but we cannot find an avenue by which (in the early days, at least) this thing seems to have been theological writing or speech, or even to Christian ritual behavior, then what was it? Both arguments – that Christians would have needed to guard their speech to avoid suspicion of sedition, or that they would not need to – center Christian language, speech, ideology, and doctrine as the primary locus of dispute between Christianity and Rome, particularly in the days of Paul.

This may seem like hair-splitting, but when I look at the scholars I interacted with in "Hidden Criticism?", it does seem that the prevailing assumption among many of these writers is that christology and the Pauline gospel would have been perceived as anti-Roman. Indeed, Heilig writes that "Robinson's admission that Paul would have seemed very controversial to Roman eyes without any hidden layers points to the additional possibility that we might find criticism of the Roman Empire that is not actively concealed by the apostle but rather quite blunt."²⁷ Perhaps. But perhaps there is also another option – that in practice, Romans did not seem to know that much about Christian theology, even while

²⁷ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 137.

they were opposing Christianity as a movement. Does this conversation overly insist on the importance of the *content* of Paul's theology as a location of friction between Paul and Rome – and therefore, one that would need to be obliquely stated? Or have we failed to attend to the evidence of how Rome saw Christians, and instead allowed Christian literature to define the conversation?

Both Tacitus and Pliny use the same word to describe Christianity – *superstitio*. Both of them simultaneously acknowledge that the Christian teaching and corporate worship is harmless. Nonetheless, the problem is that they are perceived to be part of a *superstitio*. So what exactly is a *superstitio*? And what makes this dangerous, even if the particular content or practices of the *superstitio* itself are not?

2 What is *superstitio*?

The origins of the Latin word *superstitio* lie in the Greek word *deisidaimonia*. *Deisidaimonia*, in part, denotes anxiety – unnecessary fear of the gods or of evil omens, as opposed to philosophical, virtuous beliefs that understand the benevolence of the gods.²⁸ Among Romans, *superstitio* did not necessarily denote fear. It could refer to incorrect beliefs about the gods, or occasionally to magic.²⁹ It could also refer to “excessive” religion – closer to the connotations of “fearfulness” known among the Greeks.³⁰ However, generally speaking, *superstitio* seems to particularly denote religious beliefs that were seen as “anti-Roman” in some capacity. The dominant distinction seems to be between *pietas* and *virtus*, or religious devotion that was serviceable to public order and civic virtue, or (better yet) carried out by state agents on behalf of the Roman people.³¹ *Superstitio*, by contrast, was foreign and threatening. This could include divination, which might include prophecy that ran the risk of destabilizing the empire.³² Tacitus, for example, is aware of the specific content of Druid and Gaulic beliefs that threaten Rome – for instance, prophecy that predicts the coming triumph of a colonized nation.³³

Closely related to the phenomenon of *superstitio* were the movements that were sometimes seen as spreading them – associations, foreign religious movements, or voluntary groups. According to Livy, foreign religious movements

²⁸ Dale B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 30.

²⁹ Martin, *Inventing Superstition*, 127–9.

³⁰ Martin, *Inventing Superstition*, 129.

³¹ Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 67–8.

³² Martin, *Inventing Superstition*, 133.

³³ Martin, *Inventing Superstition*, 134.

were generally restricted.³⁴ A rite that could claim antiquity may be permitted as long as it registered with the local praetor, restricted its membership to a smaller number, and did not share funds.³⁵ Clearly, some level of control was taken to make sure that foreign religions were not spreading rapidly, starting anew, or gaining too much influence. These were all elements that would have specifically flagged Christianity as a potential threat – it was new, and it did spread rapidly.

Even still, we must note that a Roman does not need to know the content of a *superstitio* belief system in order to count it as *superstitio* proper. For instance, Tacitus shows no awareness of any apocalyptic beliefs attached to the Christian movement, nor does he seem to know any claims associated with the lordship of Christ, which he perceives to be in conflict with the emperor. The problem seems to simply be the offense posed by a group associated with foreign religion, whose very existence and non-compliance with civic order is perceived as at odds with Roman authority. Of course, these groups were also stereotyped as participating in bizarre, depraved, or violent rituals – which Christians were also accused of doing. The obvious analogy here is the Bacchanalia movement, which was suspected of depraved acts and possibly seditious actions in 187–86 BCE.³⁶ Indeed, the epistles between Pliny and Trajan suggest that a group did not even have to gather for specifically religious or political reasons for Roman authorities to suspect it of posing a danger. Pliny and Trajan, after all, express concern about the danger posed by the regular gatherings of a fire brigade (*Ep. 10.33–34*).³⁷ The category of beliefs that made a religion *superstitio* among the ruling class included any element that made these beliefs suspiciously non-Roman, and among Roman authorities, the regular gathering of *any association* was a possible risk to the peace of the city. A group could gather for explicitly pro-social reasons, such as burial of the dead, joining laborers, or fighting fires, and still be seen by local leaders as a possible danger to local leaders.³⁸

Of course, some associations could be, and were, integrated into the community life of the larger city and allowed to function within the bounds of the law.³⁹ *Superstitio*, though, were viewed with more suspicion than a normal organization. This may be a place where it is appropriate to note that a Roman would not have to know very much about Christianity in order to think of it as a *superstitio*. Its origins were in the East, its members seem to have primarily come

³⁴ Though see Eric M. Orlin, “Foreign Cults in Republican Rome: Rethinking the Pomerial Rule,” *MAAR* 47 (2002): 1–18, for the incorporation of foreign shrines into the city of Rome.

³⁵ Wilken, *The Christians as Romans Saw Them*, 17.

³⁶ Richard Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians*, WUNT II/161 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 42–46; Nock, *Conversion*, 73.

³⁷ Eric Brewer, “Suspicion, Integration, and Roman Attitudes towards Associations,” in *Greco-Roman Associations, Deities, and Early Christianity*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022), 33–48, 36.

³⁸ Brewer, “Roman Attitudes Towards Associations,” 39.

³⁹ Brewer, “Roman Attitudes Towards Associations,” 42–44.

from disenfranchised classes, and the religion clearly prioritized the interests of colonized people and individuals over the larger body politic.⁴⁰ Likewise, membership in a movement that seemed to dissuade members from participating in other, better established cults was also highly suspect. For example, Celsus criticizes Christians for forming their own societies, instead of participating in the societies that were already present in the city.⁴¹

This was, generally speaking, an era in which religion was primarily defined not by doctrines and beliefs but by rituals and public actions – attending certain shrines, making certain offerings, and participating in rituals.⁴² As such, it is not surprising that Christian persecutors also focused on behavior. There is no sense in Pliny's letter to Trajan that suggests he thinks the content of Christian messianic expectations is a threat to Rome. Pliny wants the population to comply with local demands and participate in civic temples. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* may not reflect an historical event,⁴³ but it is striking how much the questioning of Polycarp mimics Pliny's own account of his trials. Once again, the proconsul is much more interested in Polycarp's compliance, rather than any danger posed by his beliefs. Polycarp's response that he believes in honoring earthly authorities (*Mart. Pol.* 10) is not framed as a response to any concern that the proconsul might have had about him as a revolutionary. The proconsul never suggests that Polycarp has been speaking against the Empire. Rather, he demands Polycarp show deference to local authorities and forswear involvement in the Christian movement in the same way Pliny does. The proconsul appeals to Polycarp's age, tells him to swear by Caesar, curse Christ, and denounce the atheists (*Mart. Pol.* 9). He warns Polycarp that if he does not do this, he will be killed (*Mart. Pol.* 11), but if he complies, he will be released. None of this suggests that anyone involved thought that Christians were committing treason in their communities.⁴⁴ Rather, the act of persisting in involvement with the community made them suspect. The *Martyrdom of Felicitas and Perpetua* follows the same pattern. Hilarionus the procurator urges Felicitas to swear by the emperor and deny she is a Christian, for the sake of her elderly father and infant child (*Pass. Perp.* 2.2). Felicitas's condemnation does not seem to be attached to any specifics of her beliefs, and certainly no sense that she poses a danger to the Empire. Rather, she has refused the directives of the procurator and maintained her loyalty to an antisocial group.

⁴⁰ Martin, *Inventing Superstition*, 130–33.

⁴¹ Wilken, *The Christians as Romans Saw Them*, 45.

⁴² Jörg Rüpke, *On Roman Religion: Lived Religion and the Individual in Ancient Rome*, reprint ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 20–1.

⁴³ See Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, LCL 24–25 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), 357–65.

⁴⁴ Markus Mertaniemi, "From Superstition to Religio Christiana: Christians as Others from the Third to the Fifth Century," in *The Faces of the Other: Religious Rivalry and Ethnic Encounters in the Later Roman World*, ed. Maijastina Kahlos (Brepols, 2011), 135–64, 140–41.

Again, the pattern we have seen throughout is that Roman officials did not seem to know much about Christianity and did not see Christian beliefs themselves as threatening Roman rule. Rather, Christian behavior – forming in secret groups and refusing participation in other societies – was the issue. In light of this, it seems less and less likely that Christians would have seen their correspondence as a locus of conflict between themselves and Roman authorities. Their meetings were *already* the point of friction, while their writings seem to have been largely unknown to authorities. None of this depends on the Roman state being particularly liberal in regards to speech. It depends on Rome *simply being inefficient* – they could deal with a countercultural figure if that person was directly brought to them, but mail and treatises were less subject to concern.

At what point did Romans become interested in the content of Christian beliefs? It seems that, on the whole, this was mostly limited to rhetoricians who were interested in debunking Christian claims, as well as to persuade the public that Christians were dangerous.⁴⁵ For example, Celsus clearly made a point of learning about the Hebrew Bible and refuting its content,⁴⁶ as well as Christian attempts to frame Jesus as the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecies. Celsus also critically engages the historical story of the life of Jesus – that he was able to do magic because of his time in Egypt, that his followers were shady fellows, and that he was killed for a life of crime.⁴⁷ Celsus drew a sharp connection between the superstitious tendencies of the Christians, the irrationality of their beliefs, and their supposed bent towards sedition (3.5; 8.2; 8.49). Later debunkings of Christianity that engaged Christian theology also survive in fragments of Galen⁴⁸ and Porphyry.⁴⁹

So what can we say about this? Celsus and his fellows shared an understanding with Pliny that Christianity was a *superstitio* and therefore dangerous to Roman interests. However, Pliny's conclusions, unlike Celsus's, did not rest on any particular awareness of Christianity, or the contents of Christian beliefs. The argument over the specifics of whether or not Christianity's central claims were true, and in what way they were subversive, happened at the level of text and rhetoric. Romans engaged them when they wanted to persuade the public that Christians were dangerous and misguided, and, of course, when Christians wanted to persuade the public this was not true. Among bureaucrats, the situation seems to have been more straightforward. Christians were part of a *superstitio*, and that in itself was dangerous.

⁴⁵ Mertaniemi, "From Superstitio to Religio Christiana," 139.

⁴⁶ Martin, *Inventing Superstition*, 4–6.

⁴⁷ Martin, *Inventing Superstition*, 142–44.

⁴⁸ Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 68–93.

⁴⁹ Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 126–63.

But if this conflict regarding the specific claims of Christianity took place between apologists and counterapologists, this seems to bolster my original arguments regarding hidden criticism. As I wrote in 2021:

The occasion of trying to prevent an armed insurrection is not the time to mince words. “Caesar is God, but don’t revolt and don’t kill anyone” is an objectionable statement for a Jewish man, and also hard to misconstrue from a reader’s perspective. If this is all Paul wished to say, he could – and in the plainest reading of Paul’s letters, he did.⁵⁰

This seems to be mostly what tried Christians are recorded as having said as well. They are not recorded speaking harshly against the Empire – certainly not by hagiographers, but not even by Pliny. Still, the act of being part of a *superstitio* is itself objectionable. None of this speaks against Heilig’s hypothesis of unnoticed criticism, but it certainly does not speak in favor of hidden criticism, or even unexpressed criticism. The focus of concern is the anti-imperial *act*, not anti-imperial *language*. Roman officials did not demonstrate interest in Christian language, hidden or otherwise.

So this brings me to my final point. If the act of being part of an association or *superstitio* is seen as anti-Roman, what *actions* (not beliefs!) associated with the group appear to be specifically countercultural? And does Paul speak openly about them? As we will see, he does! This may yet be another avenue for discussing “unnoticed criticism” – the ways in which Paul’s letters were frankly countercultural, without resorting to the search for imperial criticism.

3 Other Unhidden Criticisms in Paul

Even well after Paul, martyr acts rarely seem to suppose that Christian theology was understood (or even misunderstood!) by Romans as a set of revolutionary beliefs. This, of course, does not mean that Romans did not see Christian practice as destabilizing to public order. Again – they did! But it does raise the question of why a Christian might specifically be oblique in their critique of the Roman Empire or emperor, when they seem to have been quite straightforward about their other destabilizing beliefs.

For example, a number of martyr *acta* contain the motif that Christian attract negative attention by destabilizing marriages and the household. Perpetua, of course, loses her milk supply for her baby as soon as she is condemned and rejects her father’s orders to recant (1.2; 2.2; 3.1). Perpetua rejects her social role as obedient daughter and devoted mother, and as a result she is condemned. The motif of rejecting family for piety also appears in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Thecla is engaged to Thamyris (2.1) when she hears Paul’s sermon praising

⁵⁰ Robinson, “Hidden Transcripts?,” 71.

those who live as virgins, including the married who live as though they have no wives (1.12–22; cf. 1 Cor 7:29). When Thecla refuses to marry, her mother calls for her to be burned as a warning to other women (3.9). In both these cases, the idea that refusing to participate in normal family life is seen as an antisocial act that is strongly connected to persecution and martyrdom. The fourth century text *The Acts of Andrew* also features an extended plot in which Andrew faces torture, imprisonment, and death for persuading the Christian Maximilla to refrain from sexual contact with her husband Aegeates. My argument here is not that these stories reflect actual historical events. Nonetheless, what is attested in all of them is the assumption that Christian preaching disrupts family life and gender hierarchies, and the preachers who encourage this behavior are vulnerable to persecution. Yet the belief that Christians should favor celibacy figures quite clearly in 1 Corinthians 7, and there is no indication that Paul is hesitant to suggest he believes this (1 Cor 7:8; 25–26). Once again, we see that antisocial behaviors, rather than christological convictions, are strongly associated with persecution in Christian literature. Nonetheless, endorsement of these antisocial behaviors *still appears* in Paul's letters. If Paul does not code his thoughts about celibacy, why would we expect him to code his beliefs about Jesus's lordship and its relationship to the empire?

Closely related to this is Porphyry's argument that Christianity catered to the credulous, and the dominance of female members demonstrated this.⁵¹ Porphyry also noted that Christian communities were led by women, or impoverished individuals who depended on women's charity.⁵² Once again, we do not see efforts from Paul's undisputed epistles to disguise this fact! Paul is generally quite open about the fact that churches meet in the homes of women, and that women seem to be occupying public facing roles. His letter to the Romans is carried by Phoebe (Rom 16:1), he addresses the apostle Junia (16:7), and he receives messages from Chloe's household (1 Cor 1:11). He also assumes women will be prophesying in church (1 Cor 11:2–16). If these practices were seen as antisocial, why does Paul make no effort to disguise them in his writings? Could it be that Paul is being as frank as he wishes?

Scott's theories of "disguise" may actually be relevant here. The "arts of disguise," as Scott calls them, only occasionally involve veiled or coded criticism as many Pauline scholars have constructed them (what Scott calls "euphemism," essentially).⁵³ But this is far from the only kind of "hidden transcript" that Scott allows for. Pauline scholars have focused their attentions on coding, and Heilig has focused his attentions on the different ways in which counternarratives emerge and conflict with public transcripts, but Scott's interest is also on the dif-

⁵¹ Mertaniemi, "From Superstitio to Religio Christiana," 143.

⁵² Mertaniemi, "From Superstitio to Religio Christiana," 143.

⁵³ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 152–4.

ferent *forms* in which hidden transcripts can emerge – namely. For Scott, another form of resistance is the “refusal to reproduce hegemonic appearances.”⁵⁴ Here, Scott makes a distinction between “practical failure” to maintain a hegemonic script in behavior, as opposed to outright refusal.⁵⁵ The latter is far more likely to result in dramatic backlash from the dominant party – for example, this is the difference between failing to stand at attention with one’s hand on one’s heart in front of a flag, as opposed to refusing to salute it or even burn it. The pattern of open refusal is actually what we see attested, and then persecuted, in the letters of Pliny and Trajan. Pliny and Trajan do not believe that Christians are producing seditious writings related to Jesus. Pliny’s justification for his violent behavior is that Christians are obstinate. They refuse to do what Rome says they must concerning their religious practices. One does not need to appeal to Scott’s category of “euphemistic” hidden criticism, or “laying it on thick,” to see evidence of a counternarrative running through Paul’s letters. The act of meeting in a group to observe the rites of an exclusive, foreign religion – and then continuing to do so when told not to – is *itself* perceived as resistance. This is exactly what Scott anticipates – no hidden criticism required!

What we are not seeing in these examples is evidence that Paul spoke only obliquely about matters that would be perceived as counter-cultural. Scott would describe Paul’s writings that counsel a general un-Romaness towards family and gender as a “practical failure to comply” with dominant forces, as opposed to a “declaration of refusal.” However, Paul’s “practical failure” becomes “outright refusal” in the martyr acts. Paul’s advice to remain single becomes Thecla’s spurning of her husband. In light of the fact that Christians were eventually persecuted for behavior and beliefs that Paul otherwise voiced, but did not, why do we think Paul would not plainly state *other* disruptive ideas – that he thought the Roman Empire was an inherent force for evil, or that the Emperor’s lordship was in conflict with Christ, and so on? Again, I think unnoticed criticism may be the best option here – Paul can and does say things that are in some sense critical of the Roman Empire, whether this is that Christians should not be focused on marriage or his references to Claudius’s triumph. What I do think it points decisively away from, though, is any possibility of “coding.” Paul encourages his followers to meet in groups that he certainly knows are not registered with the praetors. He discourages them from marrying, and he is open about the role that women have in his churches. All these practices will eventually be seen as anti-social and anti-Roman, but Paul makes no effort to disguise them. Presumably, Paul’s writing about the Empire is the same way. It is as frank as he wishes it to be, even if exegetes have historically not noticed this.

⁵⁴ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 203.

⁵⁵ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 203.

4 Conclusion

To sum up: once again, Paul's letters probably do not contain coded criticism of the empire intended to evade Roman surveillance. On this, Heilig and I are agreed.⁵⁶ While Heilig is interested in pursuing other avenues in which Paul may have voiced his unease or disagreement with public imperial transcripts, I argue that a more fruitful way forward may be to not focus so much on what Christians said and wrote about the Roman Empire. No one denies that something about the Christian movement offended and disturbed the Roman state – Paul did go to prison repeatedly, Nero thought Roman Christians were arsonists, and Pliny tried them as Christians. What we do not have, though, is evidence that this oppression was specifically connected to Roman concerns about claims Christians made in their theology – specifically, it does not seem to be attached to claims Christians made about Christology or the Roman Empire. However, none of this means that Christians were not perceived as countercultural or threatening. In their refusal to obey magistrates regarding gathering in group, Christians were performing a refusal to acquiesce to the “public transcript” as Rome knew it. For Scott, this is another form of the hidden transcript revealing itself to the establishment class. Scott's work is quite applicable to the circumstances of persecuted Christians. However, the search for “hidden criticism” in Paul's letters, rather than Scott's other categories of resistance, remains attached to misunderstandings regarding policing and surveillance in the Roman Empire, and is less useful.

My goal here has not been to refute Heilig's book, or even his engagement with mine. My finding is that, in actual fact, we do not seem to disagree that much. I defended a fairly narrow thesis, and he defended a different one that largely does not address matters that I addressed myself. Of my original article, Heilig said that I was not “appreciating sufficiently the consequences that would have come from the fact that early Christianity would have looked problematic in its social context,” and that I “did not provide an explanation for why we have very solid documented evidence from just a few decades later for intense social and governmental pressure on Christians in precisely the ‘liberal’ Roman environment she portrays.”⁵⁷

I argue that neither of these points were addressed in my original, narrow thesis. I also argue that my original thesis, that the surveillance culture and speech policing of Rome did not pose a meaningful threat to Christian communication that would have required “coding,” is threatened by Heilig's argument for “unnoticed criticism.” I have argued that Paul did not have a motivation to hide his criticism, and I believe I have been seconded here. Heilig appeals to Paul's courage, and Heilig's category of “expressed” criticism. I here appeal to the wide

⁵⁶ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 140.

⁵⁷ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 136.

array of Christian behaviors that Paul encouraged both in practice and in text, and I believe that all of this further casts doubt on the claim that some category of unmentionable beliefs still existed for Paul that he did not write down. None of this depends on the supposed “liberalism” of Rome, as Heilig suggests.⁵⁸ Rome was certainly not “liberal” in the sense that it respected individual liberties as a class. All this requires is for Rome to be fairly non-literate and inefficient, which, I would contend, my original article showed. A society with limited literacy and a decentralized justice system could not operate as an effective surveillance state, even if Rome might have liked that.

Heilig’s larger thesis, which he devotes much of his attention to, is that criticism of the Empire is quite plainly stated in the text. That may well be the case, and I believe that I have myself offered some evidence that anti-Roman behaviors are encouraged in Paul’s letters. Again, while I do not believe this invalidates my initial thesis regarding hidden criticism, it certainly *does* support Heilig’s work on unnoticed criticism. I do not want to defer too much to the idea that Rome was aware of Christian theological beliefs enough to police them, nor do I wish to insist that Christian practices were unobjectionable to Romans. Refusal to participate in male-dominant orders, traditional households, or civic cults *is* anti-imperialism. The necessary correction that may yet remain in all conversations about Christianity and empire is a redirection from Pauline Christology and explicit Roman criticism where Christian persecution is concerned. The practices of gathering in groups to flout social structures, a refusal to participate in civic worship, and a tendency to elevate the woman and denigrate the family is itself enough of an explanation for why the Christian movement eventually faced pushback. None of this requires hidden criticism of the empire, and no evidence of hidden criticism seems to present itself. On this front, I believe Heilig and I are agreed.

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⁵⁸ Heilig, *Apostle and Empire*, 136.

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Ancient Rhetoric

Figured Speech as Hidden Transcripts

Najeeb T. Haddad

In recent scholarship, increasing attention has been given to the phenomenon of “figured speech” (ἐσχηματισμένος λόγος in Greek, or *oratio figurata* in Latin) as a key rhetorical device employed in antiquity.¹ *Figured speech* refers to a mode of communication in which a speaker or writer says one thing while meaning something else. Crucially, this indirection is not mere decorative figurative language, but a deliberate strategy to convey a covert message under the guise of an overt statement. Ancient rhetoricians taught that such speech was typically used to criticize or convey sensitive content safely, especially when open, blunt speech (*παρρησία*, “frankness”) was imprudent or dangerous.² In contrast to open irony or sarcasm, figured speech was meant to remain hidden to all but its intended audience.

Considering first-century Christians who lived and wrote under conditions – such as imperial Roman rule and intra-Jewish tensions – that at times necessitated caution in communication. Though these early Christ believers were a minority movement, such movements could often be viewed with suspicion. Open denunciation of powerful groups or the Empire by minority groups could invite persecution.³ Thus, scholars have asked whether New Testament authors or other Christian writers of the era might have employed figured speech as a rhetorical *safety valve*: encoding critiques of opponents or of imperial ideology in veiled terms. This possibility has spawned a larger discussion, intersecting

¹ I am indebted to the work of Jason A. Whitlark. *Resisting Empire: Rethinking the Purpose of the Letter to “The Hebrews,”* (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2014), whose discussion of figured speech I closely follow. Cf. Najeeb T Haddad, *Paul, Politics, and New Creation: Reconsidering Paul and Empire* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020), 43–78. Other works on figured speech include: Idem., *Paul and Empire Criticism: Why and How?* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023), 39–51; Drew J. Strait, *Hidden Criticism of the Angry Tyrant in Early Judaism and the Acts of the Apostles* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019); Justin R. Howell, *The Pharisees and Figured Speech in Luke-Acts*, WUNT II/456 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 3–22; Coring Mihaila, *The Paul-Apollos Relationship and Paul’s Stance Toward Greco-Roman Rhetoric*, LNTS 402 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 61–65, 203–12.

² Haddad, *Paul, Politics, and New Creation*, 48–50; Howell, *Figured Speech*, 15–16.

³ Take for example the history of the Bacchic and Isianic cults in Rome, which, at times, adherents were not only persecuted but the cults were banned within the city Rome. See Haddad, *Paul and Empire Criticism*, 9–15; idem., *Paul, Politics, and New Creation*, 88–96.

with concepts found in James C. Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* who popularized the concept "hidden transcript" (a modern sociopolitical category describing how subordinate groups encode subversive resistance in disguised form).⁴ Indeed, some interpreters of the New Testament have suggested that certain passages for example, Paul's exhortation in Rom 13:1–7 function as "hidden transcripts" against Rome.⁵ However, as I argued elsewhere, it is more appropriate to ground such analysis in the ancient rhetorical framework of *figured speech* itself rather than solely modern theory.⁶ Drew Strait, for instance, contends that *figured speech*, as understood by ancient rhetoricians, provides a firmer literary basis for detecting covert critiques in Christian texts than the anachronistic use of *hidden transcript* theory.⁷ In other words, if early Christian authors intended to communicate subversively, they would likely do so via the rhetorical conventions of their time.

This essay examines *figured speech* within first-century Greek and Roman antiquity, with particular interest in first-century Christianity. Combining rhetorical analysis with historical-critical context, this essay will proceed to define *figured speech* by exploring its treatment in Greek and Roman rhetorical handbooks, including the various types of *figured expression* and the methods ancient rhetoricians described for employing and detecting it. The core of the essay will then critically assess how and where *figured speech* appear in the Pauline texts, especially in Rom 2:1–3:20 and Phil 2:5–11. Ultimately, the present study will offer a nuanced appreciation of how the rhetorical device of *figured speech* enriches our understanding of early Christian rhetoric and the delicate balance these New Testament texts struck between frank proclamation and prudent circumspection.

⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); also James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). For an extensive and appreciative evaluation of Scott's work with regards to New Testament studies see Richard Horsley, ed., *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004); Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 29.

⁵ Cf. Neil Elliott, *The Rhetoric of Romans: Argumentative Constraint and Strategy and Paul's Dialogue with Judaism*, JSNTSup 49 (Sheffield: Sheffield Press, 1990); idem., "Romans 13:1–7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda," in *Paul and Empire*, ed. Richard Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 184–205; Dieter Georgi, "God Turned Upside Down," in *Paul and Empire*, 148–57; E. G. Singgih, "Towards a Postcolonial Interpretation of Romans 13:1–7: Karl Barth, Robert Jewett and the Context of Reformation in Present-Day Indonesia," *AsJT* 23 (2009): 111–22; Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 780–803; R. Cassidy, "The Politization of Paul: Romans 13:1–7 in Recent Discussion," *ExpTim* 121 (2010): 383–89; M. Forman, *The Politics of Inheritance in Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Bernard Lategan, "Romans 13:1–7: A Review of Post-1989 Readings," *Scriptura* 110 (2012): 259–72; N. T. Wright "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretations: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 167–73.

⁶ Haddad, *Paul and Empire Criticism*, 28–51.

⁷ Strait, *Hidden Criticism*, 8–11.

1 The Ancient Rhetorical Device of Figured Speech

1.1 Definition and Purpose of Figured Speech⁸

Ancient rhetoricians recognized *figured speech* as a distinct and sophisticated rhetorical technique. The Greek term ἐσχηματισμένος λόγος and the Latin term *oratio figurata* both convey the idea of speech “cast in a figure” or form – in other words, speech that carries a meaning beyond its literal statement. In figured speech, what is not said outright defines figured speech succinctly as “saying one thing and meaning another” (*Inst.* 9.1.29). Quintillian emphasizes the covert nature of the technique, warning that if a figure’s meaning becomes too obvious, it ceases to be a figure at all (*Inst.* 9.2.69). In other words, a figured utterance should ideally fly under the radar of literal-minded hearers (especially those whom the critique might endanger or offend) while being understood by those attuned to the speaker’s intent.

The purpose of figured speech is closely tied to considerations of safety, propriety, and audience sensitivity. One does not resort to such indirection for mere ornamentation; rather, it is employed when speaking openly is imprudent or impossible. Hermogenes of Halicarnassus notes that a speaker will use figured speech “whenever we are not able to speak openly because [we are] hindered and lacking freedom of speech” (*De inv.* 4.13.206).⁹ The implication is that external pressures, such as political repression, risk of punishment, or the need for tact, calls for a subtle approach. Rather than biting sarcasm or blatant mockery, which could be easily recognized (and punished), the practitioner of figured speech aims to criticize appropriately and respectfully, with plausible deniability. In a society where outspoken παρρησία might be lauded in theory but perilous in practice under imperial rule, figured speech became a “safe” vehicle for dissent. If a veiled critique could be interpreted as innocuous or even as praise on the surface, the speaker could avoid the charge of sedition or impropriety. In sum, figured speech allowed ancient orators and writers to deliver a message within a message: a benign literal message for general (or hostile) listeners, and a barbed or critical subtext perceivable to those “in the know.”

1.2 Types of Figured Speech in Rhetorical Theory

Ancient rhetorical handbooks did more than just define figured speech, they categorized its various forms or techniques. An important witness is a work ascribed to Pseudo-Hermogenes, which delineates three basic types of figured problems (τὰ ἐσχηματισμένα προβλήματα) (*De inv.* 4.13.205–206).¹⁰

⁸ This section of the essay is primarily based on my research in *Paul, Politics, and New Creation*, esp. 43–54.

⁹ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ Whitlark, *Resisting Empire*, 23. The Greek text used and consulted and referenced for

“Ἐμφασις (implied meaning), involves insinuation or allusion, where the speaker hints at a meaning without stating it directly (cf. Quintilian, *Inst. 9.2.3*). It relies on the audience to read between the lines. The hidden message might be conveyed through tone, an unusual word, a metaphor, or an allusion that a perceptive audience member could catch. Pseudo-Hermogenes explicitly notes that this figure should be employed whenever the speaker lacks freedom to speak openly (*De inv. 4.13.206*), indicating ἔμφασις is the go-to strategy under repression. An example from ancient literature. Pseudo-Demetrius describes how a short phrase can carry an emphatic punch (*Eloc 1.8*). He cites the laconic insinuation “Dionysius at Corinth.” On the surface, it’s a bare statement about Dionysius (a tyrant of Syracuse) residing in Corinth, but to informed hearers it was an ironic hint that this once mighty despot had been deposed and lived in dishonorable exile. With just a few words, the speaker *implies* the downfall of Dionysius without explicitly deriding him. A quintessential ἔμφασις that would be appreciated by those aware of the backstory.¹¹

Πλάγιον (deflection) entails a sidestepping strategy, where a speaker achieves a covert aim by ostensibly talking about something else (cf. Ps.-Dionysius, *Ars. Rhet. 296. 14–20*). In πλάγιον, the orator has multiple layers of intent: an overt objective and one or more covert objectives intertwined (literally “sideways” speech). Pseudo-Dionysius illustrates πλάγιον with a scene from Homer’s *Iliad* (*Ars Rhet. 325.13–327.18*; cf. Homer, *Iliad 9.32–49*). The young hero Diomedes, responding to Agamemnon’s suggestion that the Greeks flee the war, appears to scold Agamemnon and urges him to sail home. At face value, this rebuke seems out of place and disrespectful (as Pseudo-Dionysius observes, it would be quite *ἄτοπος* and inappropriate if taken literally). However, Diomedes is in fact feigning disloyal advice to achieve the opposite effect: by giving the impression he wants Agamemnon gone, he actually shames the king and steels his resolve to stay and fight. The overt speech (“Yes, leave the battle, King, if that’s what you want”) camouflages the covert aim (to motivate the king to remain). Thus, the πλάγιον figure “deflects” or diverts the literal meaning to accomplish a subtler persuasive goal. Rhetorically, Diomedes’ apparent insubordination is a ruse: beneath it lies loyalty and encouragement. This example shows how πλάγιον can be used to carry multiple messages at once, often to reconcile conflicting purposes (here, voicing criticism while supporting the leader).

Ἐναντίον (saying the opposite) refers to what is essentially irony in its figured form (cf. Pseudo-Hermogenes, *De inv. 4.13.205*). Ἐναντίον involves stating the opposite of what one truly means, but in a controlled rhetorical manner

Pseudo-Hermogenes’ *Invention* and *Method* is from George A. Kennedy trans., *Invention and Method: Two Rhetorical Treatises from the Hermogenic Corpus* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005).

¹¹ See Frederick Ahl, “The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome,” *AJP* 105 (1984): 174–208; esp. 187–92.

that signals the inversion to the discerning listener. Quintilian identifies this as disguised irony (*Inst. 3.7.25*). A common use of ἐναντίον in antiquity was in encomium and invective: one could blame through praise or praise through blame. For instance, an orator might lavish exaggerated commendations on someone's dubious behavior, in effect highlighting those actions as blameworthy by the disproportionate praise. This exploitation of virtue's relative nature is noted by Jason Whitlark who wrote, "virtue was often understood as the mean between two vices," one can portray a vice as a virtue or vice versa.¹² The listener, recognizing the excessive or contrary description, perceives the irony.

A concrete illustration is found in Plutarch's *Moralia* (*Adul. Am.* 56C). Plutarch warns that flatterers will mask vices as virtues, for example calling cowardice "self-preservation" or a hot-tempered person "spirited." Such euphemistic reversals are a form of ἐναντίον. By calling a coward *prudent*, the speaker is drawing attention to the cowardice, but in a way that the flattered person might not immediately object to. The speaker's true opinion is concealed behind the opposite statement. Importantly, ancient sources distinguish ἐναντίον from simple sarcasm in intent: the goal is not merely to ridicule the opponent openly, but often to achieve a longer-term persuasive or ethical effect.¹³ Quintilian adds that a good man will not use such disguised irony gratuitously, unless compelled by the public good (*Inst. 3.7.25*). Thus, ἐναντίον was understood as a deliberate, ethical strategy: a means to an end (perhaps to correct or caution someone) while appearing to do the opposite (offer praise), thereby avoiding immediate confrontation.

Pseudo-Dionysius, in *Ars Rhet.* 8.295.15–296.5, confirms these three main categories (though he uses different terminology) and even lists additional sub-types of figured speech though they essentially depend on and overlap with ἔμφασις, πλάγιον, and ἐναντίον.¹⁴ The classical theorists were clearly interested in cataloguing the various flavors of indirection an orator might employ. Yet for our purposes, the key takeaway is whether by *implied hint* (ἔμφασις), *indirect approach* (πλάγιον), or *ironic reversal* (ἐναντίον), the ancient rhetor was well-equipped to cloak one meaning within another. Such strategies would be part of an educated speaker's toolbox in the Greek and Roman world.

1.3 Employing and Detecting Figured Speech: Rhetorical Tactics

Given that figured speech was intentionally obscure by design, ancient writers also discussed how to effectively employ it so that the intended audience under-

¹² Whitlark, *Resisting Empire*, 28.

¹³ Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study*, eds. David E. Orton and R. Dean Anderson, trans. Matthew T. Bliss et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 405.

¹⁴ Cf. D. A. Russell, "Figured Speeches: 'Dionysius,' Art of Rhetoric VIII–IX" in *The Orator in Action and Theory in Greece and Rome: Essays in Honor of George A. Kennedy*, ed. Cecil W. Wooten (Brill: Leiden, 2001), 156–68.

stands the hidden message, and how listeners/readers might detect it. A successful figured speech requires a kind of tacit collusion between the speaker and the discerning hearer. Figured speech creates an implicit understanding between the speaker and the audience. But how is this tacit understanding established?

Some ancient Greco-Roman rhetoricians outline various techniques for crafting figured speech, particularly emphasizing the category of ἔμφασις (implied meaning). As Whitlark notes, these lists of techniques are illustrative rather than exhaustive.¹⁵ The *Rhet. Her.* identifies five strategies under the broader category *significatio*, a rhetorical concept closely aligned with ἔμφασις (4.53.67). These subcategories include hyperbole (*superlatio*), ambiguity (*ambiguum*), logical consequence (*consequentialia*), aposiopesis (*abscisio*), and analogy (*similitudo*).

Hyperbole involves stating more than the truth allows to amplify suspicion or effect (*Rhet. Her.* 4.53.67). Quintilian similarly describes hyperbole as an elegant exaggeration or understatement, employed for stylistic emphasis (*Inst.* 8.6.67). Hyperbole can be conveyed through exaggerated truths, lavish praise, or metaphor.

Ambiguity also contributes to the creation of ἔμφασις. The *Rhet. Her.* explains that ambiguity arises when a word possesses multiple meanings, yet it is intentionally used to direct the listener towards a specific, implied interpretation (*Rhet. Her.* 4.53.67). Ambiguity does not merely confuse; rather, it strategically guides the audience between alternative interpretations. However, the handbook cautions that identifying ambiguity requires careful attention to words' multiple meanings (*Rhet. Her.* 4.54.67). Quintilian further elaborates that ambiguity is a clever interplay between apparent and deeper meanings (*Inst.* 8.2.21).

Logical consequence is another rhetorical method of achieving ἔμφασις, defined as stating the implications or outcomes derived from a given situation, thereby fostering suspicion or doubt (*Rhet. Her.* 4.54.67). Logical consequence involves assuming implications or necessary conditions from observed circumstances.

Aposiopesis, the intentional breaking off of speech (*Rhet. Her.* 4.54.67).¹⁶ It is typically classified into two types: emotive and calculated aposiopesis. The emotive form results from heightened emotional intensity, causing the speaker to abruptly stop and then often resume after regaining composure, sometimes using transitional conjunctions (cf. Quintilian, *Inst.* 9.2.54). Calculated aposiopesis, in contrast, strategically omits speech due to underlying conflicts, relying on the audience to infer the omitted content. This calculated form, often termed emphatic aposiopesis, strengthens the intended rhetorical effect (*Rhet. Her.* 4.30.41).

Analogy is the final method mentioned for expressing ἔμφασις. The *Rhet. Her.* describes analogy as citing a parallel situation without extensive explanation,

¹⁵ Whitlark, *Resisting Empire*, 33. See also pgs. 33–35.

¹⁶ Aposiopesis is also called reticentia (Ps. Cicero, *Rhet. Her.* 4.54.67), obticentia (Cicero, *De oratore* 3.205), and interruptio (Quintilian, *Inst.* 9.2.54).

indirectly suggesting the intended meaning (4.54.67). Elsewhere, analogy is explained more fully as a rhetorical device transferring similarity from one context to another for enhancement, proof, clarification, or vividness (4.46.59). This broad category encompasses simile, metaphor, and various comparative techniques.¹⁷

Quintilian, also includes apostrophe as a notable rhetorical figure for creating and recognizing figured speech (*Inst.9.2.38*). Apostrophe involves “turning away” from the primary audience to address a different, often surprising audience, eliciting an emotional reaction. Lausberg describes apostrophe as an emotional expression of despair.¹⁸ The figure frequently appears as rhetorical questions (*interrogatio*), expecting no direct response but implying an obvious answer. A well-known example from Vergil’s *Aeneid* illustrates apostrophe when Aeneas rhetorically asks about the destructive power of greed, clearly signaling a self-evident answer and intended to evoke emotional reflection (Aen. 3.56: cf. Quintilian, *Inst. 9.2.7*).

One ancient discussion of detection comes (indirectly) through the historian Josephus. In his *Jewish War* (4.340), Josephus pairs *figure* and *irony* in describing certain speech, which suggests that even in practice, discerning readers like Josephus knew to look for ironic subtext in ostensibly plain statements.¹⁹ As Whitlark observes, the fact that Josephus felt the need to comment on a possible hidden meaning implies that educated audiences were on the lookout for such figures.²⁰ Rhetoricians like Quintilian provided criteria for recognizing when an orator was speaking in figures, especially in political contexts. Modern scholars have built on these hints to formulate methodologies for identifying figured speech in texts. For instance, Christopher P. Craig established criteria for spotting *oratio figurata* in Cicero’s speeches such as sudden changes in tone, addressing the audience in a conspiratorial manner, or the presence of contradictions that make better sense when read as irony.²¹ Such criteria mirror what the ancient handbooks qualitatively described.

As I have emphasized elsewhere, the need for caution in over-detecting figured speech is warranted.²² Because this rhetorical technique is “slippery” and inherently ambiguous, interpreting a passage as figured speech requires solid evidence that the author intended a hidden meaning. Otherwise, critics may project their

¹⁷ Richard F. Thomas, “A Trope by Any Other Name: ‘Polysemy,’ Ambiguity, and Signification in Virgil,” *HSCP* 100 (2000): 381–407.

¹⁸ Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, 338.

¹⁹ Jason A. Whitlark, “Here We Do Not Have a City that Remains: A Figured Critique of Roman Imperial Propaganda in Hebrews 13:14.” *JBL* 131 (2012): 161–79.

²⁰ Whitlark, “Here We Do Not Have a City that Remains,” 170–71.

²¹ Giovanni Margiotta, “Reading the *Scholia Gronoviana*: Ambiguity and Veiled Language in the Interpretation of Cicero’s Caesarian Orations,” in *The Scholia on Cicero’s Speeches*, ed. Christoph Pieper and Dennis Pausch (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 243–66.

²² Haddad, *Paul and Empire Criticism*, 24–27.

own assumptions onto the text. The ancient manuals themselves were aware of the danger of mistaking a straightforward statement for a figure or vice versa. As Quintilian wisely observed, if a supposed figure is completely obvious, it fails to be a figure (*Inst. 9.2.69*) but conversely, if a claim of hidden meaning has no obvious anchor, it might be an over-interpretation. The orator who used figured speech successfully left just enough breadcrumbs for the intended audience to follow, while others remained oblivious.

The rhetorical deployment of figured speech was a high-skill endeavor. The speaker had to know their audience intimately and gauge what hints would be sufficient yet safe. They also had to modulate their tone and wording to maintain plausible deniability. Meanwhile, sympathetic listeners needed intellectual and often educational preparedness to catch the subtext. This dynamic essentially formed an “in-group” communication, fostering a sense of shared understanding among those who perceived the hidden critique. We will see that in the context of early Christianity, this dynamic could operate when, for example, a Christian author critiques the Roman Empire or hostile authorities: fellow believers “in the know” might perceive the thrust of the critique, whereas Roman officials reading the same lines might find nothing overtly objectionable.

2 Figured Speech in Context: First-Century Conditions for Coded Communication

Understanding the historical *Sitz im Leben* of figured speech in the first century is vital for a critical appreciation of its use in Christian texts. The early Imperial era, particularly under emperors like Nero, Domitian, and others, was a time when free political speech was limited. Openly criticizing the Roman state or its leaders could result in negative repercussion. Literary circles of the time were replete with examples of writers who suffered for their frankness, or who mastered oblique critique to survive. Frederick Ahl’s seminal study *The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome* documents how poets and authors under repressive regimes (from classical Athens to imperial Rome) cloaked their dissents in allegory, irony, and other figures to avoid retribution.²³

Beyond imperial politics, early Christians also faced tension with various religious and social groups (Jews, pagan neighbors, local authorities) where diplomacy in language could be important. Within local political discourse, for instance, Paul may choose a nuanced presentation of a relationship with civil leaders, rather than outright polemic, if he wished to avoid alienating segments of his audience or drawing unwanted attention. There were also practical communal reasons: sometimes a veiled critique could be pastorally wise, pre-

²³ Ahl, “Safe Criticism.”

venting further strife or persecution for the community. In short, the motives for using figured speech in Christian texts could range from avoiding Roman censure, to maintaining a veneer of respectability, to encouraging believers under persecution without explicitly inciting rebellion.

Modern scholars have drawn parallels between figured speech and the concept of “hidden transcripts” of the oppressed. James C. Scott described how subordinate groups develop offstage discourses that critique power structures in coded ways to avoid direct reprisals.²⁴ Biblical scholars like Richard Horsley, Neil Elliott, and others have applied this concept to early Christian literature, suggesting, for example, that the New Testament harbors a subdued protest against Roman imperial ideology beneath its surface.²⁵ However, as mentioned, caution must be exercised so that one should stick to categories the ancient writers themselves might recognize. From the perspective of a first-century rhetorician, a “hidden transcript” would simply be a species of ἐσχηματισμένος λόγος.

The rhetorical tradition provided the techniques and conceptual framework for speaking covertly, while the historical circumstances, an authoritarian imperial state, social marginalization of Christians, and the need for community encouragement, provided ample motivation to use those techniques. With this background in mind, we turn now to examine specific texts and cases within the New Testament and early Christian literature where scholars have identified (or hypothesized) the use of figured speech. We will apply both rhetorical understanding and historical-contextual analysis to evaluate these cases, striving to appreciate the nuanced skill of the authors and to critically weigh how far the evidence supports a figured-speech reading.

3 Figured Speech in Romans 2:1–3:20: Apostrophe to Someone Who Acts Hypocritically

In his masterful rhetorical commentary, Thomas H. Tobin outlines Paul’s use of the figure ἀποστροφή (apostrophe) In Rom 2:1–3:20.²⁶ Recall apostrophe in-

²⁴ See Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

²⁵ Cf. Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in the Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); idem., ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretations: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000); idem., ed., *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004); Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); idem., “Blasphemed Among the Nations: Pursuing an Anti-Imperial ‘Intertextuality’ in Romans,” in *As It Is Written: Studying Paul’s Use of Scripture*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and C. D. Stanley, SBLSS 50 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 213–33; idem., “Paul’s Political Christology: Samples from Romans,” in *Reading Paul in Context: Explorations in Identity Formation*, ed. Kathy Ehrensperger and J. Brian Tucker, LNTS 428 (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

²⁶ I am indebted to the work of Thomas H. Tobin on Rom 2:1–3:20, which I closely follow

volves “turning away” from the primary audience to address a different, often surprising audience, eliciting an emotional reaction. Apostrophe frequently appears as rhetorical questions (*interrogatio*), expecting no direct response but implying an obvious answer. Oftentimes, it refers to a moment in which the speaker or writer turns to address someone (or something) directly, often an absent party, an imaginary opponent, or a personified entity, as though they are present and listening (Quintilian, *Inst. 4.1.63–70*). In Rom 2:1–3:20, Paul repeatedly makes use of this strategy to frame his message about the impartial judgment of God, indicting hypocrisy in both gentiles and Jews, and to move his argument forward in a confrontational yet instructive manner. By examining Rom 2:1–11, 2:12–29, and culminating in 3:1–20, it becomes clear how Paul’s use of apostrophe both clarifies and intensifies his controversial conclusion: God’s judgment falls equally on Jew and gentile. Neither group is exempt, and all are accountable to the same divine standard.

Often introduced by an exclamation such as “O Man,” apostrophe signals a shift from a generalized discourse to a pointed, personal confrontation. This figure can create a vivid effect, drawing an audience in by making them overhear a “conversation” with an absent or hypothetical person. It can also serve to sharpen an argument, as it forces a reader or listener to identify with the addressee under critique. Paul’s adaptation of this rhetorical device to a theological letter is especially notable. Instead of simply describing the sins or errors of a generic group in the third person, he addresses someone directly by singling them out with “O Man” in Romans 2:1 and subsequently “but if you call yourself a Jew ...” in Romans 2:17.²⁷ These turns heighten the polemical tone and invite the audience to examine themselves through the lens of Paul’s sharp challenge, for they may find that the charges laid against “O Man” or “you who call yourself a Jew” apply to them as well.²⁸

Romans 1:18–3:20 forms one continuous argument in which Paul establishes the universal sinfulness of humanity. In Romans 1:18–32, he describes the depravity that arises from idolatry and unbelief, condemning primarily the Gentile world for exchanging the truth about God for idols. Then, starting in Romans 2, he pivots dramatically. Those who might nod approvingly at the denunciation of Gentile idolatry are suddenly placed under indictment themselves. Through the figure of apostrophe, Paul addresses an imaginary interlocutor, “O Man,” and systematically demonstrates that God’s judgment is impartial. Whether one is

here. See Tobin, *Paul’s Rhetoric in its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 110–23.

²⁷ All translations of the New Testament are mine, unless otherwise noted. Greek text is sourced from NA28.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Rhet. 2.9.1–16; Rhet. Her. 4.15.22; 39.51*; Cicero, *Inv. 1.53.100*. The *Rhet. Her. 4.15.22* connects the arousal of indignation with the use of apostrophe, which is quite similar to what is found in Rom 2:1–6. Cf. Tobin, *Paul’s Rhetoric*, III n. 18.

a Gentile idolater or a Jew with special access to the law, sin and hypocrisy will meet the same divine condemnation.

Paul announces a major rhetorical shift at Romans 2:1 by directly confronting an unnamed opponent: διὸ ἀναπολόγητος εἰ, ὁ ἄνθρωπε. This *apostrophe* “O Man” (ὁ ἄνθρωπε) functions as emotively. After a lengthy critique of the gentile world’s immorality (Rom 1:18–32), a sympathetic Jewish reader might think Paul is only condemning other nations. Yet with “O Man,” Paul shatters any complacency. The abrupt turn suggests a single hypocrite or a group of moralists who affirm God’s condemnation of idolatry, but secretly (or not so secretly) practice similar sins. Paul thus aims the condemnation that began in Rom 1 at a new target: anyone, Jew or gentile, who commits the same faults they denounce in others.

Within this address, Paul simultaneously draws on Jewish eschatological language in Rom 2:5: “you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath,” evoking the Day of the Lord from the Hebrew Scriptures.²⁹ The notion of “wrath” signals to any listener/reader steeped in Jewish traditions that Paul is not discarding scriptural authority. On the contrary, he is advancing a consistent theological principle. God is just, impartial, and has judged idolatry and hypocrisy alike throughout salvation history.³⁰ If you believe God judges immoral gentiles (Rom 1:18–32), you must also believe He judges the same immoral conduct when done by Jews or by self-righteous moralists.

Paul underlines God’s impartiality with the rhetorical argument that if God condemns the gentiles’ sins, He must likewise condemn sin wherever it appears. The apostrophe here is crucial because it implicates the addressee in a direct conversation. It corners “O Man” into conceding that what is true for gentiles must be equally true for Jews: “There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good … For God shows no partiality” (Rom 2:9–11). By means of this confrontation, Paul sets the stage for the more specific critique of Jewish reliance on the law and covenantal markers that follows in Romans 2:12–29.

In the next section of the argument (2:12–29), Paul articulates that “all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law” (2:12).³¹ This reaffirms the principle that knowledge of the law, or possession of the Mosaic Torah, does not

²⁹ Cf. Isa 2:12; 13:6; 24:21; Jer 46:10; Ezek 7:7; 30:3; Joel 2:1–2; Amos 5:18; Zeph 1:17, 15, 18; 2:2–3. Paul also uses this imagery elsewhere in his letters: see 1 Cor 1:8; 5:5; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 1:6, 10, 2:16; 1 Thess 5:2.

³⁰ Such a viewpoint of God’s righteous judgment against such things was commonplace within Jewish thought. See Isa 13:6–16; 34:8; Dan 7:9–11; Joel 2:1–3; Zeph 1:4–2:3; 3:8; Mal 4:1.

³¹ Emphasis added.

provide a free pass from judgment. The crucial criterion is doing what the law requires, whether one possesses the codified commandments from Mount Sinai.

This expands the apostrophe from “O Man” to a broader principle: God’s tribunal is universal, and it is moral practice, not mere affiliation, that matters. Gentiles who do by nature what the law requires (Rom 2:14) function as a law to themselves, showing that the “work of the law” is written in their hearts. Meanwhile, Jews who presume on possessing the law without truly obeying it stand condemned by that very law. The rhetorical effect is to underscore that both groups face an identical standard: God’s impartial justice.

It is notable that in 2:14–15, Paul seems to speak of “law” in a more general sense, including the moral imperatives that align with the Mosaic Law’s essence. While the phrase *tòv vóμον* might, in other contexts, signify the Mosaic regulations, here Paul’s focus lies in the principle of obedience to God’s moral standard, whether it comes via the explicit Jewish Law or an inward moral awareness. Ultimately, it is possible for some gentiles to do by nature (*φύσει*) what the law requires. By continuing to treat the law in this broad sense, Paul steers the conversation away from ethnic identity and back toward universal accountability.

Having laid out the principle of God’s impartiality, Paul turns more specifically to his Jewish audience in 2:17 with another apostrophe: *εἰ δὲ σὺ Ιουδαῖος ἐπονομάζῃ ...* (“But if you call yourself a Jew ...”). Once again, he uses the rhetorical device of direct address, this time focusing it on a hypothetical Jew who presumes upon Torah possession and covenant status but fails to practice the law’s demands. As with “O Man,” this strategy intensifies the confrontation, making the argument more pointed and vivid:

1. If you teach others, do you not teach yourself? (2:21)
2. You who say one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? (2:22)
3. You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. (2:23)

This string of rhetorical questions fosters a sense of direct engagement, forcing the hypothetical Jewish interlocutor to acknowledge that knowledge of the law alone will not justify him.

Paul insists that Jews, just like gentiles, are judged on the basis of action, not identity. In the same way that gentiles are condemned for moral depravity (Rom 1:18–32), so also are Jews condemned if they violate the moral and ethical requirements of the law. Paul’s earlier point in 2:1–5, that those who condemn others for the same offenses they themselves practice stand under God’s judgment, loudly resonates here.

Moreover, the rhetorical force of apostrophe ensures that the reader cannot escape a sense of personal exposure. While in 2:1–11 the “O Man” could be any moralist, 2:17–29 leaves no doubt that Paul’s criticisms apply to *Jews* who rely on the covenant yet fail to obey the moral substance of the Torah. By keeping the address direct, “You call yourself a Jew ... you rely on the law ... you boast,”

the apostle compels the audience to face the logical conclusion of the argument: hypocrisy is intolerable to God, no matter one's ethnic or religious advantages.

Within this address, Paul draws on traditional Jewish Scriptures and "traditional viewpoints," as is evident when he speaks of circumcision (2:25–29) and references typical Jewish pride in having the oracles of God. Yet the outcome of his rhetorical argument is surprisingly untraditional from a first-century Jewish perspective: the privileged status of being a Jew under the covenant is overshadowed by the more fundamental requirement of moral obedience. Paul quotes Isa 52:5 [LXX] in Rom 2:23–24 to support the claim that those who pride themselves on having the law but transgress the same law dishonor God.³² He goes on to suggest that even circumcision becomes meaningless if a Jew is lawless; indeed, a gentile who upholds the law "will be regarded as though he were circumcised" (2:26). Paul thus uses traditional beliefs, God's holiness, Israel's covenant, the final judgment, to arrive at a radically leveling conclusion: all people stand on equal footing before God's proverbial bar of justice.

In so doing, Paul effectively shows that the audience's traditional assumptions (God is just and impartial, the law reveals God's will, God punishes sin) lead to an untraditional result, possession of Torah or membership in the covenant community alone will not deliver one from condemnation. This is all enforced by the direct confrontation of apostrophe: the Jew cannot hide behind the identity "I am a teacher of the foolish, an instructor of the immature" (2:20) if the Jew does not live up to that instruction itself.

In Rom 3:1–20 Paul concludes that *all* stand under sin, "both Jews and Greeks" (3:9) and he cites a barrage of scriptural proof texts (3:10–18) confirming that no one is righteous, Jew or Gentile. Although apostrophe is less explicit in 3:1–20, the momentum from the earlier sections, both the general "O Man" and the more specific "if you call yourself a Jew," sets the stage for the statement: "every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God" (3:19).

The rhetorical effect is that no one can claim ignorance or innocence; Paul's direct addresses have pulled Jew and Gentile alike into the dock. The final verdict is that "by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight" (3:20). Here, Paul paves the way for his grand announcement of the righteousness of God through faith in Christ, which follows in 3:21 and beyond. But the significance of the apostrophe in Romans 2:1–3:20 rests in revealing the universal need for that righteousness. If "O Man" (whether Jew or Gentile) is guilty and the Jew with the law is also guilty, then no group or individual is exempt from the condemnation and thus no one can claim salvation outside of God's gracious intervention.

The figure of apostrophe in Romans 2:1–3:20 accomplishes several rhetorical goals:

³² Tobin, *Paul's Rhetoric*, 116.

1. Heightened Confrontation: Instead of speaking generically about sin, Paul points a finger at an imaginary but plausible interlocutor. By imagining a dialogue, he heightens the tension and makes an emotive personal charge.

2. Clarity of Message: Because apostrophe directly addresses the hypothetical moralist or Jew, it clarifies that Paul's argument is not limited to pagan idolaters. He underscores a universal standard.

3. Inclusivity of Critique: Even if the initial impression in Romans 1 is that pagans stand condemned for idolatry and immorality, Romans 2 prevents any Jew or morally self-satisfied gentile from evading the scope of the indictment.

At the same time, apostrophe can alienate or offend if the audience interprets it too personally, which is why Quintilian suggested it be used sparingly.³³ A Jewish listener might take umbrage at being addressed so sharply, “but if you call yourself a Jew....” Perhaps that is precisely the effect the apostle intended, for rhetorical confrontation can jolt an audience out of complacency. Or it may be that Paul's aim is for believers in Rome (both Jewish and Gentile) to “overhear” the apostrophe, to glean that no part of the community has moral high ground. The abiding message is that reliance on identity markers, be they circumcision of the flesh, covenant, law, ancestry, or even ethnicity counts for nothing when faced with the reality of sin.

Paul's rhetorical choices contribute to the sweeping theology in Romans. By forcibly leveling the playing field between Jew and Gentile, Paul prepares for his doctrine that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23) and that justification is a gift of God's grace through faith in Christ (3:24). This theological payoff could not be as powerfully realized if Paul had not first confronted each group, through apostrophe, and dismantled any illusions of inherent moral superiority. In the economy of Romans, one must be condemned under sin before one can fully appreciate the saving righteousness of God revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Apostrophe is integral to that rhetorical unveiling of universal guilt.

Thus, the use of apostrophe in Romans 2:1–3:20 exemplifies how Paul uses rhetorical artistry to drive a theological point. By addressing imaginary opponents directly, he universalizes the plight of sin and primes both Jews and gentiles for the gospel's solution in Christ. The pointed “O Man” and “but if you call yourself a Jew ...” signals that no category of person can elude divine scrutiny. The upshot is consistent. Because God is impartial, and since all people sin, everyone needs redemption. In this way, Paul's rhetorical confrontation becomes a gateway to grace, as he will later proclaim that the righteousness of God is now revealed to all who believe (Rom 3:21–26). The figure of apostrophe, therefore, is not merely ornamental but essential to Paul's overarching theological argument,

³³ R. Dean Anderson, *Glossary of Greek Rhetorical Terms Connected to Methods of Argumentation, Figures, and Tropes from Anaximenes to Quintilian* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 25.

paving the way from condemnation to justification, from hypocrisy unmasked to hope offered freely in Christ.

4 Phil 2:5–11: Figured Speech or Hidden Transcripts?

In approaching Philippians 2:5–11, it is important to recognize at the outset certain exegetical decisions and to appreciate how the rhetorical device of ἔμφασις may inform Paul’s presentation of Christ’s humility and exaltation. While there is vigorous debate concerning the structure, authorship, and origins of both the letter and the so-called “Christ Hymn,” these preliminary observations and choices help us see how Paul’s rhetorical approach can function theologically within the social world.

First, I assume the unity of the Letter to the Philippians.³⁴ Although some have argued it may comprise multiple letters spliced together, the manuscript tradition shows no such partition; nor does external evidence suggest any editorial rearrangement. Problems or abrupt transitions (e.g., Phil 3:1–2) can be explained better by Paul’s style than by postulated later redactions. Furthermore, despite these transitional shifts, the letter’s thematic focus remains coherent – namely, Paul’s exhortation for the community to cultivate κοινωνία (partnership) in the gospel and maintain unity under trying circumstances.

Second, I follow the widely held view that the “Christ Hymn” of Phil 2:6–11 was not originally composed by Paul, even though he appears to have shaped certain lines (notably 2:8b “death on a cross” and 2:10b “in heaven and on earth and under the earth”).³⁵ The shared nature of this hymn between Paul and the Philippian believers heightens its persuasive effect: a text already known and held in high esteem by the community becomes a common ground for Paul’s exhortation. That common ground, in turn, allows Paul to employ the hymn rhetorically, particularly through ἔμφασις, to reinforce central theological and ethical points.

³⁴ On the integrity of Philippians, see e.g. Robert Jewett, “The Epistolary Thanksgiving and the Integrity of Philippians,” *NovT* 12 (1970): 40–53; Jeffrey T. Reed, “Philippians 3:1 and the Epistolary hesitation Formula: The Literary Integrity of Philippians Again,” *JBL* (1996) 63–90; Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, Rev. ed. WBC 43 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), xxx–xxxiv; John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 8–13; Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd ed. BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 12–14.

³⁵ For a discussion on the *form* of this passage, which I understand to be a hymn used in context of worship, see Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 108–13. For the Pauline insertions see Reumann, *Philippians*, 375; Thomas H. Tobin, “The World of Thought in the Philippians Hymn (Philippians 2:6–11),” in *The New Testament and Early Christian Literature in Greco-Roman Contexts: Studies in Honor of David E. Aune*, ed. John Fotopoulos (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 91–104.

Key lexical factors buttress the premise that this is a pre-existing hymn. It contains three hapax legomena in Paul (ἀρπαγμός, μορφή, and ὑπερωψώ) and uses certain words in ways that diverge from Paul's typical usage. For instance, κενώ (Phil 2:7) otherwise carries negative connotations in Paul's letters (Rom 4:14; 1 Cor 1:17; 9:15; 2 Cor 9:3); here, however, it forms the positive concept of Christ's "self-emptying." All of this suggests that Paul is creatively applying a known tradition.

In form and content, the hymn points to Christ's pre-existence.³⁶ For instance, the contrast between "existing in the form of God" (Phil 2:6) and "taking the form of a slave" (2:7) implies transitions of states or conditions, rather than mere stages in Jesus' earthly life.³⁷ While the hymn does not highlight a cosmological role (unlike John 1:1–3, Col 1:15–17, or Heb 1:3), it does emphasize an anthropological movement: the pre-existent Christ, "in the form of God" (ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ), willingly abandons divine privilege and assumes the "likeness of humankind" (Phil 2:7).

Paul's audience, familiar with such a tradition, would already revere Christ as "Lord." Yet by adapting this hymn, Paul applies a rhetorical technique of ἔμφασις, subtly affirming more than a mere theological proposition about Christ's status. He underscores the ethical and communal implications of that belief. Namely, that this exalted Lord voluntarily became lowly, calling believers likewise to adopt a "self-emptying" mindset. Rhetorically, this sets up a paradigm for the Philippian community's own "obedience" and unity. Through "implied meaning," Paul conveys something that goes beyond a straightforward hymn citation. By leading into the hymn with "fashion this mind which is in Christ Jesus" (τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ύμῖν ὁ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ) in Phil 2:5 Paul signals that Christ's status and self-emptying are not just theological facts, but an urgent summons for his listeners' transformation. Ultimately, considering ἔμφασις, the self-emptying of Jesus Christ should shape the believers' entire way of thinking, and they, too, should be ready to pour themselves out in service to God and one another.

Philippians 2:6–7 succinctly describes Christ's voluntary renunciation of divine prerogatives:

[Christ Jesus,] who existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be seized, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.³⁸

³⁶ Contra James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), xviii–xix; Jerome Murphey-O'Conner, "'Christological Anthropology in Philippians 2:6–11.' RB 83 (1976): 25–50; Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 192–94.

³⁷ Tobin, "World of Thought," 92–93.

³⁸ ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἀρπαγμὸν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι Ἰσα θεῷ, ἀλλ' ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος.

Even if the broader Christian tradition later developed an elaborate doctrine of pre-existence, this passage already attests to a vision in which Christ moves from a divine state to a genuinely human one. The key verb here, κενόω, is striking. In Paul's other letters, it bears negative connotations, such as "nullify" or "make void." By contrast, in the Christ Hymn it conveys a positive, voluntary act of self-giving. The rhetorical force of this "emptying" is sharpened by the mention that Christ chose the form of a slave, an absolute social inversion from divine status to the lowest rung of human society.

Within the letter's rhetorical flow, the emphasis behind "he emptied himself" is not simply about renouncing divine nature. Rather, by highlighting the slave-form (μορφὴν δούλου) and stressing a shift from "equality with God" (ἴσα θεῷ) to a lowly state, Paul underscores a radical disparity that the Philippians (themselves non-elite or socially marginal) might emulate.³⁹ That is, if even the pre-existent Christ humbly served God's will, how much more should they adopt an attitude of obedient humility?

The second half of the hymn (Phil 2:7c–8) underscores that humility and obedience define Christ's earthly existence:

... and being found in human appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death – death on a cross.⁴⁰

Whereas Greco-Roman society often exalted heroic, imperial, or aristocratic virtues, Paul uses "implied meaning" to invert these notions, placing ultimate honor in humility before God. Crucifixion was the most shameful means of execution in the Roman world, used to punish slaves and criminals.⁴¹ By adding "death on a cross," Paul intensifies the rhetorical shock. The highest God underwent the worst human degradation. Christ's "obedience" is not to a civil ruler or human power structure but directly to God's will. For the Philippian believers, this is a crucial pastoral point: they, too, must remain obedient "to the point of death," though not necessarily by crucifixion, but by daily self-giving and loyalty to the gospel message.

The apostle's reference to the cross as an act of obedience can be read as a clarifying editorial addition, one that resonates strongly with Paul's own theology. Here again, ἔμφασις plays a role. To unsympathetic ears, the phrase "death on a cross" might appear simply to highlight a tragic end. Yet the faithful

³⁹ On the phrase ἴσα θεῷ in the context of Philippians see Silva, *Philippians*, 100–101. As a voluntary action by Christ, see Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 117.

⁴⁰ καὶ σχῆματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτόν, γενόμενος ὑπῆκοος μέχρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ.

⁴¹ Fowl, *Philippians*, 99 comments on the crucifixion says, "Crucifixion was the most humiliating form of state-sponsored execution, a form of death reserved for slaves. It is clear that, from Rome's perspective, those who were crucified were not simply humiliated, but humiliated by Roman power. The public display of the crucified body served both as testimony to Rome's power over all bodies and as a public warning against future transgressions."

audience perceives a deeper layer. This crucifixion reveals the extent of Christ's submission to God, powerfully redefining true obedience and honor in a manner that contradicts Roman power norms. Still, as the subsequent discussion will show, this contradiction does not necessarily equate to a call for subversion or rebellion against Rome.

Philippians 2:9–11 transitions the hymn's focus to divine vindication:

Therefore, God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.⁴²

In the drama of this hymn, Christ is the primary actor in self-emptying, but God is the ultimate agent who exalted the crucified one. As commentators often note, ὑπερύψωσεν is not merely comparative, Christ is not “slightly higher now than before.” Rather, it implies superlative exaltation. The final lines depict universal homage (bending the knee) and confession (ἐξομολογήσεται). As many have recognized, bending the knee is how one pays homage or may offer prayer in the ancient world. But it is also a way of to recognize the authority of another person or divinity.⁴³ The rhetorical structure here echoes Isaiah 45:22–24, where every knee bows and every tongue acknowledges God's sovereignty. By applying this language to Jesus, the hymn identifies Christ with God's cosmic lordship.

From an empire-critical perspective, one might see this as defying Caesar's own claim to universal allegiance. Yet Paul does not explicitly name Caesar or the emperor cult. Instead, the rhetorical mode of ἔμφασις, implied meaning, allows Paul to highlight that ultimate homage belongs to Christ, the crucified one. If the Philippians catch the hint of imperial claims in the background, they would also recognize that the posture of kneeling and confessing “Jesus is Lord” (Phil 2:11) necessarily relativizes all other earthly powers. The passage does not advocate revolt; rather, it redefines the locus of true majesty and cosmic dominion. It does not deny a certain prestige belonging to the imperial authority, but does diminish it in the greater schema of God's economy of salvation. In practical terms, for the “lowly” Philippian assembly, such teaching confers hope and “demarginalizes” them: they belong to the exalted Lord, who will in turn lift those who share in his humility and obedience.

Does figured speech, especially ἔμφασις, figure well into a reading of Phil 2:5–11? In reading this passage, one can come to several conclusions:

1. Elevation of the Lowly: By framing the hymn in the broader argument of the letter, Paul insists that those who share in Christ's self-emptying and obedience

⁴² διὸ καὶ ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ὑπερύψωσεν καὶ ἐχαρίσατο αὐτῷ τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ὑπὲρ πᾶν ὄνομα, ἵνα ἐν τῷ ὄνόματι Ἰησοῦ πᾶν γόνυ κάμψῃ ... καὶ πᾶσα γλώσσα ἐξομολογήσηται ὅτι κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρός.

⁴³ Cf. Ps 95:6; Mk 15:19; Lk 5:8; 22:41; Acts 7:60; 9:40; Eph 3:14. Cf. Fee, *Paul's Letter*, 224; Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 127; Haddad, *Paul and Empire Criticism*, 102–3.

will also share in his exaltation. This is especially comforting for a predominantly non-elite Philippian community that might be marginalized in civic life.

2. Christ's Universal Authority: Drawing on Isaianic imagery (where every knee bows), Paul situates Christ's lordship on a cosmic scale (Isa 45:22–24 [LXX]). This implicitly surpasses any emperor's rule. And yet, Paul does so without openly denouncing the Roman state. The rhetorical device of *ἔμφασις* helps Paul's audience understand the implication that all creation is under Christ, implicitly, but outsiders might hear only a religious affirmation of Jesus' greatness.

3. No Direct Call to Subversion: If Paul intended to craft an overtly subversive or seditious text, we would expect more explicit directives on resisting imperial structures. Instead, Paul's exhortation (Phil 1:27) is to "live out your citizenship worthily of the gospel of Christ." This demands neither total assimilation to Roman norms nor an outright rupture. Rather, believers remain free to resist civic demands that violate the gospel, but they are not ordered to rebel. Thus, the gospel does not demand *ipso facto* resistance to Roman rule. It only requires faithfulness to Christ's lordship where the two might conflict.

4. A Nuanced Rapprochement: As a Hellenistic Jewish preacher of Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, Paul already acknowledges one supreme God above all earthly powers (cf. 1 Cor 8:6). By proclaiming Christ as sharing in that divine status, he naturally subordinates civic rulers to God's purposes (cf. Rom 13:1–7). Tyrannical or unjust dominion does not reflect God's order, and in those anomalous cases, Paul might approve righteous resistance.⁴⁴ Yet in Philippians 2:5–11, no open rebellion is encouraged. Instead, the community's fidelity to the self-giving Christ can challenge society's values if necessary, but always on the basis of spiritual obedience rather than political insurrection.

Philippians 2:5–11 stands at the theological heart of Paul's letter, showcasing Christ's pre-existence, humbling, and exaltation as the ultimate example for the Philippian assembly. By introducing the hymn with the exhortation to "have the mind of Christ" (Phil 2:5), Paul deftly employs *ἔμφασις*: the believers are not merely to admire Christ's self-emptying but to adopt it in unity (*κοινωνία*) with one another and with Paul's gospel. Despite Rome and its imperial powers, Paul's focus remains on faithful obedience rather than overt subversion of civil authority.

The rhetorical power of "implied meaning" is that the text declares a simple fact: Jesus is Lord (Phil 2:11). What about Caesar? Paul is not writing a manifesto for overthrowing the Roman state. Nor are there any proof texts that scholars can easily acknowledge as containing a "hidden transcript" to subvert Rome. In fact, the apostle rarely singles out the Caesar explicitly, nor does he demand

⁴⁴ Though there are no Pauline texts which directly consider righteous resistance, there are examples of such resistance in Judaism, prominently Daniel and three youths who refused to worship the golden statue of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3). See Haddad, *Paul and Empire Criticism*, 64–70.

that Christians repudiate Roman citizenship or everyday civic obligations. Instead, his Christ-focused language redefines what genuine lordship involves (i.e., humility, service, obedience to God). His declarations like “Jesus is Lord” serve primarily a theological and ethical function. Theologically, Paul elevates Christ to the position of cosmic authority, superior to any earthly power. Ethically, Paul calls believers to embody the humility and sacrificial love manifested by Christ, eschewing the empire’s usual value system of honor, status, and coercive rule.

Even though “Jesus is Lord” is not framed as a political slogan in a modern sense, it carries an implicit critique of Caesar’s pretensions. By presenting Jesus as the one to whom every knee shall bow (Phil 2:10–11) and to whom believers owe ultimate allegiance, Paul does relativize the emperor’s place. If Caesar claims absolute honor or worship, the Christian confession “Jesus is Lord” quietly but firmly contests it. Still, Paul typically underscores living “peaceably with all” (Rom 12:18) and even recognizes governing authorities as instituted by God (Rom 13:1–7), which suggests his message is not subversive.

Moreover, in practical community life, recognizing Jesus’ lordship might mean that if Roman demands contradict the gospel, believers must obey God rather than humankind. Yet Paul does not dwell on confronting Caesar’s rule directly. His letters concentrate on forming Christ-centered communities whose “citizenship is in heaven” (Phil 3:20). This rhetorical stance can function as both faithful witness and quiet challenge. Christians may respect secular authorities but will not elevate them to the *devotion* that belongs to Christ alone.

While conveying more profound implications to insiders who share Paul’s worldview, there is only one name before whom every knee will bow, and that name is not Caesar’s. But such a statement must remain nuanced. As mentioned above, recognizing Jesus’ lordship does not disqualify the *lordship* of Caesar. Especially if the emperor rules in obedience to the will of God. Yet Paul never couches Jesus’ lordship as a seditious call to arms. Instead, he invites believers to conform their minds and lives to the crucified and exalted Messiah, confident that God will in turn “lift up the lowly.” This balanced approach, self-emptying service leading to divine exaltation, helps the community thrive in Philippi’s challenging cultural matrix while remaining faithful to the gospel’s transformative vision. Thus, while Christ’s lordship does indeed overshadow all other lordships, the letter’s rhetorical strategy is one of encouragement and formation, built on a nuanced vision of how true power, embodied in Christ, redefines human relations without requiring direct political revolt.

5 Conclusions: Figuring Out Figured Speech

Stepping back, what do these findings tell us about early Christian rhetoric and its appreciation? First, they remind us that early Christian authors were par-

ticipants in their literary culture, not oblivious to rhetorical conventions. They could deploy irony, allusion, and layered meanings as well as any educated writer of their time. Recognizing this enriches our interpretation of Scripture, adding depth. However, second, it urges caution and methodological rigor. Not every ambiguity or culturally loaded term is a covert cipher. As critics of some modern readings have noted, there is a tendency to “find” subversive messages whether the evidence warrants it. A rhetorical and historical-critical approach must balance openness to nuance with respect for the clarity of authorial intent. In practice, this means examining factors such as consistency with the surrounding context, availability of the allusion to the original audience, presence of textual clues, and coherence with the author’s known purposes. The analyses above modeled this approach, affirming figured speech where these factors converged (Rom 2:1–3:20), and questioning it where they did not (Phil 2:5–11).

The ancient device of figured speech finds a fitting home in the rhetoric of first-century Christianity, illustrating the movement’s unsurprising engagement with its surrounding culture. Through clear examples and careful argumentation, we have seen that maintaining the original footings of evidence is key to identifying when “saying one thing and meaning another” is truly at play. The appreciation of this device enhances our reading of early Christian texts, allowing us to hear them with the ears of their first audiences. Sometimes hearing exactly what is said, and at other times catching the whispered critique beneath the shouted confession.

Throughout, the importance of context, caution, and clarity in scholarly analysis has been underscored. Figured speech is, after all, an exercise in context and caution by the speaker; it deserves an equally context-attuned and careful approach by the interpreter. In appreciating this nuanced rhetorical strategy, one not only gains insight into the historical communicative acts of the early church but also admires the intellectual creativity with which truth can find voice even under constraining circumstances. The Logos of God, it seems, was not only proclaimed openly but, when needed, also *whispered between the lines*, for those with ears to hear.

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Papyrology

Perspectives on Empire in Everyday Documents

Gillian Asquith

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, archaeological excavations in Egypt uncovered a wealth of documentary texts pertaining to everyday life in the ancient world. Two Oxford classicists, Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, excavated the rubbish heaps of ancient settlements situated above the inundation level of the Nile, where the dry sands were conducive to preserving organic material.¹ Over several decades, Grenfell and Hunt unearthed thousands of documents written on papyrus, most in Greek.

Grenfell and Hunt had initially set out to search specifically for Christian and literary texts, but among the papyri they found were everyday documents recording the administrative and personal affairs of the settlements' inhabitants. Some documents contained matters of a purely official or administrative nature: imperial decrees, minutes of court proceedings, or correspondence between government officials. Some recorded the interactions between private individuals and public officials: census declarations, tax receipts, and petitions. Others pertained to personal affairs, including marriage contracts, loan agreements, household accounts, party invitations, letters between business associates, and letters between family and friends.²

Documentary papyri continue to be discovered and published (although not in the quantities found by Grenfell and Hunt), and in the century or so since Grenfell and Hunt's excavations, the term "documentary papyri" has been extended to refer to documentary texts written in ink on surfaces additional to

¹ Prior excavations by other archaeologists such as Sir William Matthews Flinders Petrie had also unearthed papyri, but mostly by accident. Grenfell and Hunt's excavations were the first to focus specifically on looking for papyri. For an overview of the history of excavating papyri, see Kevin J. Boyle, "The Place of the Papyri: Excavation, Collection, Provenance, and Archaeology," in *Inscriptions, Papyri, and Other Artifacts*, ed. James R. Harrison and E. Randolph Richards, ALNTS 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024), 491–507. For a broader introduction to the discipline of papyrology, see Roger S. Bagnall, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

² See Christina M. Kreinecker, "Introduction to Documentary Papyri," in *Inscriptions, Papyri, and Other Artifacts*, ed. James R. Harrison and E. Randolph Richards, ALNTS 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024), 28–38, for a general overview of documentary papyri. See Bernhard Palme, "The Range of Documentary Texts: Types and Categories," in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 358–94, for more detailed discussion.

papyrus: potsherds (termed “ostraca”), parchment, vellum, and wooden boards. The documents found in Egypt were mostly written on papyrus, but ostraca are also represented among the finds. It is the texts contained in these documentary papyri that this chapter will explore in relation to empire criticism and the New Testament.³

The chapter will present an overview of the way documentary papyri have been used more broadly in NT studies, before showing how most empire studies assume that these papyri make purely philological contributions to the field. Whilst philological insights from papyri are indeed useful, this chapter will argue that documentary papyri are more valuable for offering socio-historical insights into the lives of ordinary people in the ancient world. Their content provides potential parallels with the hidden transcripts of the NT and the multiple interconnected identities that characterised the people who wrote them.

1 Methodological Considerations

The city of Oxyrhynchus is the site perhaps most associated with the discovery of documentary papyri, but excavations at other sites throughout Egypt have also produced documentary findings. Documentary papyri have been discovered outside Egypt, but the inescapable fact is that the majority (estimated at more than 98 percent) of documentary papyri available to draw on for informing study of the NT come from Egypt.⁴ Nevertheless, there are good reasons for defending the legitimacy of applying such resources to the NT.

The vagaries of archaeological preservation are responsible for the geographical distribution of extant documentary papyri. The climatic conditions in Egypt permitted the survival of perishable material such as papyrus, whereas conditions elsewhere were not so favourable. The prevailing view among historians now (although it has not always been so) is that the social, economic, and administrative aspects of life in Egypt correlate with those in other Roman provinces,⁵

³ See the following for further reading: Peter Arzt-Grabner, John S. Kloppenborg, and Christina M. Kreinecker, *More Light from the Ancient East: Understanding the New Testament through Papyri*, PNT 1 (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2023); Peter Arzt-Grabner, *Letters and Letter Writing*, PNT 2 (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2023); Christina M. Kreinecker, John S. Kloppenborg, and James R. Harrison, eds., *Everyday Life in Graeco-Roman Times: Documentary Papyri and the New Testament: Essays in Honour of Peter Arzt-Grabner*, SCCB 16 (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2024); Sabine R. Huebner, *Papyri and the Social World of the New Testament* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); John L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters*, FF (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); P. W. Pestman, *The New Papyrological Primer*, 2nd rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1994); Bradley H. McLean, *Hellenistic and Biblical Greek: A Graduated Reader* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 141–53.

⁴ Arthur Verhoogt, “Unique Sources in an Unusual Setting,” in *A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt*, ed. Katrijn Vandorpe, BCAW (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 6.

⁵ Roger S. Bagnall, *Reading Papyri: Writing Ancient History*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge,

and documentary papyri reflect this diatopic continuity. For example, contract documents such as leases and loans found in the Judean Desert mirror Egyptian leases and loans;⁶ likewise, slave sale contracts from Asia Minor, Syria, Italy, and Dacia Superior (present-day Romania) mirror those from Egypt.⁷ Some second- and first-century BCE Greek papyri have been found as far away as Avroman (in Kurdistan) and Bactria.⁸ Furthermore, not all papyri found in Egypt actually originated there: some were sent from other provinces to recipients in Egypt, others were carried there when the documents' owners travelled or relocated.⁹ Thus, the details of social, economic, and administrative life presented in the papyri found in Egypt may be legitimately applied to circumstances elsewhere across the Roman Empire.¹⁰

The documentary papyri used in this chapter are cited according to their abbreviated edition: see Joshua D. Sosin et al., eds., *Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca, and Tablets*, <https://papyri.info/docs/checklist>. The unique identifier assigned to each documentary papyrus in the Trismegistos database (the TM number) is also provided in a footnote.¹¹ Full transcriptions of the papyri are available in the edition cited for each document and via the Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri: <https://papyri.info>. All translations are my own.

2020), 8–13, 53–58; Naphtali Lewis, “The Romanity of Roman Egypt,” in *On Government and Law in Roman Egypt: Collected Papers of Naphtali Lewis*, ed. Ann Ellis Hanson, ASP 33 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), 298–305; Dominic Rathbone, “The Romanity of Roman Egypt: A Faltering Consensus?,” *JJP* 43 (2013): 73–91.

⁶ P.Yadin 42, 44–45. The documents were written in Aramaic but are equivalent in form to Greco-Egyptian leases. See John S. Kloppenborg, “Oral and Literate Contexts for the Sayings Gospel Q,” in *Built on Rock or Sand? Q Studies: Retrospects, Introspects and Prospects*, ed. Christoph Heil, Gertraud Harb, and Daniel A. Smith (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 61–63; Yigael Yadin et al., eds., *The Documents from the Bar Kochba Period in the Cave of Letters: Hebrew, Aramaic and Nabatean Papyri*, JDS 3 (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2002); also, Naphtali Lewis, Yigael Yadin, and J. C. Greenfield, eds., *The Documents from the Bar Kochba Period in the Cave of Letters: Greek Papyri*, JDS 2 (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1989); Philip Esler, *Babatha's Orchard: The Yadin Papyri and an Ancient Jewish Family Tale Retold* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁷ E.g., BGU 3.887 (151 CE); BGU 3.913 (206 CE); P.Turner 22 (142 CE). Peter Arzt-Grabner, “Everyday Life in a Roman Town Like Colossae: The Papyrological Evidence,” in *The First Urban Churches 5: Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea*, ed. James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn, GRWSS 16 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 188–90.

⁸ P.Avroman 1 (88 BCE); P.Avroman 2 (22/21 BCE). John R. Rea, R. C. Senior, and Adrian S. Hollis, “A Tax Receipt from Hellenistic Bactria,” *ZPE* 104 (1994): 261–80. Bactria spans present-day Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikstan.

⁹ Six hundred and nine documentary papyri found or originating outside Egypt are catalogued in H. M. Cotton, W. H. Cockle, and F. G. B. Millar, “The Papyrology of the Roman Near East: A Survey,” *JRS* 85 (1995): 214–35. The list has been supplemented more recently by Arzt-Grabner, “Everyday Life,” 189–90.

¹⁰ Arzt-Grabner, “Everyday Life,” 189.

¹¹ <https://www.trismegistos.org>.

2 Papyrology in NT Studies

In its broadest definition, papyrology refers to the deciphering and production of critical editions of handwritten texts, including literary, sub-literary, and documentary (also known as non-literary) texts.¹² In a narrower sense, papyrology describes the study of the content of these texts and their application to research questions. Gustav Adolf Deissmann (1866–1937), a German theologian first at the University of Heidelberg then at the now-named Humboldt University of Berlin, pioneered the application of documentary papyri to NT studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Deissmann's interest in documentary papyri was primarily philological. He noticed that the type of Greek represented in these papyri corresponded with the Greek of the LXX and NT, which led Deissmann to dismantle the notion that these authors wrote in “a language of the Holy Spirit.”¹³ In his seminal book, *Bibelstudien*, followed not long after by *Neue Bibelstudien*, Deissmann compared words, phrases, and idioms attested in the LXX with their usage in documentary papyri and inscriptions and showed that they represented the non-literary Greek of the time rather than a special Spirit-inspired form.¹⁴

A further work by Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten* (perhaps his best-known work), extended the method pioneered in *Bibelstudien* by showing how documentary sources were useful for reconstructing the social milieu of the earliest Christians.¹⁵ Deissmann's mostly philological approach to the relationship of documentary papyri to the NT was reflected shortly afterwards in James H. Moulton and George Milligan's *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* – a list of NT words

¹² James R. Harrison and E. Randolph Richards, “Introduction: The New Testament Documents and the Documentary Evidence of Antiquity,” in *Inscriptions, Papyri, and Other Artifacts*, ed. James R. Harrison and E. Randolph Richards, ALNTS 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024), xxviii.

¹³ E.g., Richard Rothe had postulated that the Holy Spirit transformed the linguistic units and existing terms of a particular language into a religious vernacular, saying, “The Greek of the New Testament is the most obvious illustration of this process.” Richard Rothe, *Zur Dogmatik* (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthe, 1863), 238.

¹⁴ G. Adolf Deissmann, *Bibelstudien: Beiträge, zumeist aus den Papyri und Inschriften, zur Geschichte der Sprache, des Schrifttums und der Religion des hellenistischen Judentums und des Urchristentums* (Marburg: Elwert, 1895); G. Adolf Deissmann, *Neue Bibelstudien: sprachgeschichtliche Beiträge, zumeist aus den Papyri und Inschriften, zur Erklärung des Neuen Testaments* (Marburg: Elwert, 1897). These were published together as one volume in English translation: G. Adolf Deissmann, *Bible Studies: Contributions Chiefly from Papyri and Inscriptions to the History of the Language, the Literature, and the Religion of Hellenistic Judaism and Primitive Christianity*, trans. Alexander Grieve (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1901).

¹⁵ G. Adolf Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten: Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1909); G. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1927).

arranged alphabetically and accompanied by documentary attestations and brief comments.¹⁶

A broader approach to the relationship of documentary papyri to the NT was developed by researchers at Macquarie University in Sydney in their *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* series.¹⁷ The first ten volumes, published between 1981 and 2012, used documentary papyri (and inscriptions) to help inform the social world of the earliest Christians.¹⁸ In a similar vein, the value of documentary papyri for better understanding the world of the NT has been championed by the likes of Peter Arzt-Grabner, John S. Kloppenborg, Mauro Pesce, Christina M. Kreinecker, and Sabine Huebner. Arzt-Grabner is overseeing a set of commentaries using only documentary papyri for its exegetical insights, the *Papyrologische Kommentare zum Neuen Testament* series,¹⁹ and the first two volumes of another welcome new series, *Papyri and the New Testament*, are already in print.²⁰ Volumes in the *First Urban Churches* series, edited by James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn, usually contain at least one chapter citing documentary papyri.²¹

3 Papyrology in Empire Studies

Deissmann provided a foundation for empire-critical studies in *Licht vom Osten* by discussing parallels between language used in the imperial cult and language used by the NT writers, and his influence on NT empire-critical studies cannot be overestimated. Deissmann discussed words such as θεός (God), κυριός (Lord),

¹⁶ James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930).

¹⁷ Greg H. R. Horsley and Stephen Llewelyn, eds., *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (North Ryde, NSW: The Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University, 1981–).

¹⁸ These first ten volumes, under the editorial pen of papyrologist Greg H. R. Horsley, focused heavily on papyri. After a lengthy hiatus, the series will include a further seven volumes, but the new editors, James R. Harrison and Bradley J. Bitner, note that “the new series abandons the focus of the previous pentads on newly published or reedited inscriptions, papyri, and ostraca from antiquity generally” and instead discusses inscriptions from specific NT cities. James R. Harrison and Bradley J. Bitner, eds., *Texts from Ephesus*, vol. 11A of *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2024), xxv.

¹⁹ Four volumes have been published to date: Peter Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon*, PKNT 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003); Peter Arzt-Grabner, *1. Korinther*, PKNT 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006); Christina M. Kreinecker, *2. Thessaloniker*, PKNT 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010); Peter Arzt-Grabner, *2. Korinther*, PKNT 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014). Another eleven volumes have been commissioned so far.

²⁰ Arzt-Grabner, Kloppenborg, and Kreinecker, *More Light*; Arzt-Grabner, *Letters*.

²¹ James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn, eds., *The First Urban Churches* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015–).

βασιλεύς (king), σωτέρ (saviour), εὐαγγέλιον (good news), παρουσία (coming), and ἐπιφανεία (appearing),²² and coined the term “polemical parallelism” to refer to co-opted imperial language in the NT.²³

The cult of Christ goes forth into the world of the Mediterranean and soon displays the endeavour to reserve for Christ the words already in use for worship in that world, words that had been transferred to the deified emperors (or had perhaps been newly invented in emperor worship). Thus there arises a polemical parallelism between the cult of the emperor and the cult of the Christ, which makes itself felt where ancient words derived by Christianity from the treasury of the Septuagint and the Gospels happen to coincide with solemn concepts on the Imperial cult which sounded the same or similar.

Deissmann’s philological approach to documentary sources has since been taken up by anti-imperial NT scholars; indeed, N.T. Wright quotes the phrase “polemical parallelism,” although Wright requires that Deissmann’s assessment of coincidence between the vocabulary of the LXX and Gospels and that of the imperial cult be nuanced.²⁴ Wright had already adopted Deissmann’s model of co-opted language in “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire” and *Paul in Fresh Perspective*,²⁵ and several scholars in an even earlier collection of essays edited by Richard A. Horsley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, had taken the same approach.²⁶ Horsley introduces these essays with the comment that “insofar as Paul deliberately used language closely associated with the imperial religion, he was presenting his gospel as a direct competitor of the gospel of Caesar.”²⁷

Stanley E. Porter notes that “This recognition of the exalted status of the emperor was reflected in numerous inscriptions, papyrus documents, coins, art and

²² Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 338–78.

²³ Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 342; N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 4 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 2013), 1276.

²⁴ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1276. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 59, prefers to express Paul’s appropriation of parallel vocabulary as “perhaps a more urgent task, certainly a more dangerous one: that of articulating his message in implicit, and sometimes explicit, subversion of the new ideology that was sweeping the Mediterranean world.”

²⁵ N. T. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 160–83; Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 59–79.

²⁶ Neil Elliott, “The Anti-Imperial Message of the Cross,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 167–83; Dieter Georgi, “God Turned Upside Down,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 148–57; Helmut Koester, “Imperial Ideology and Paul’s Eschatology in 1 Thessalonians,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 158–66.

²⁷ Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 140.

architecture, and the like.”²⁸ However, documentary papyri are currently under-represented in empire-critical studies: a glance through the index of a work on empire criticism will likely find references to inscriptions, but not to papyri.²⁹ Even Deissmann’s philological observations on “polemical parallelisms” focussed more on epigraphical than papyrological evidence.

In a recent assessment of empire-critical methods, Najeeb T. Haddad approvingly cites Harrison’s observation that “New Testament researchers have failed to bring the full range of documentary and archaeological evidence in sympathetic dialogue with the upper-class literary evidence and the writings of the New Testament.”³⁰ However, Haddad limits his discussion of the methods he finds most helpful to epigraphical, numismatic, and iconographical.³¹ Some papyrological data is implicit in his discussion of ancient associations, since the secondary sources he cites do draw on documentary papyri (although, even then, most of their data is epigraphical), but I have every sympathy with Haddad’s omission of explicit papyrological data in his discussion of empire-critical methods because the use of such data has, to date, been few and far between in empire-critical studies.

At best, this under-representation may be due to possible perceptions of papyrology as an esoteric discipline. At worst, it perhaps reflects one of the “blind spots that [have] traditionally vitiated the scholarly study of the corporate and civic life of the first urban believers in the eastern and western Mediterranean basin” and that prompted Harrison’s comment that “scholars have focussed on the literary evidence of the literate upper classes throughout the empire at the expense of the local documentary, numismatic, archaeological, and iconographic evidence of the Mediterranean cities in which the early churches flourished.”³² But even Harrison’s intended correctives in *The First Urban Churches* series are skewed towards epigraphy; unavoidably so, because of the limited geographical distribution of papyrological evidence in those Mediterranean cities on which the series focusses.

Perhaps the co-opted language approach accounts for the under-representation of documentary papyri in NT empire studies because the types of documents

²⁸ Stanley E. Porter, “Paul Confronts Caesar with the Good News,” in *Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Cynthia Long Westfall, MNTS 10 (Eugene, OR, 2011), 166.

²⁹ And although Christoph Heilig’s *The Apostle and the Empire: Paul’s Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome*, with a foreword by John M. G. Barclay (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 127, cites one documentary papyrus, that papyrus is relegated to the general Index of Subjects rather than being listed in the Index of Ancient Texts.

³⁰ Najeeb T. Haddad, *Paul and Empire Criticism: Why and How?* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023), Perlego edition, ch. 3, Conclusion: Methods and Methodology, citing James R. Harrison, “The First Urban Churches: Introduction,” in *The First Urban Churches 1: Methodological Foundations*, ed. James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn, GRWSS 7 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 1.

³¹ Haddad, *Paul and Empire Criticism*, ch. 3.

³² Harrison, “The First Urban Churches: Introduction,” 1.

that display co-opted language tend to be official decrees that complement epigraphical evidence rather than provide new data, as illustrated in the following two papyri. P.Oxy. 55.3781, found in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, announces Hadrian's accession.³³ It was sent from the new prefect of Egypt to local officials to inform them how their districts should celebrate the event. The notice attests *σωτηρία* (salvation, l. 3) in relation to Hadrian's rule and *θεός* (god, l. 6) in relation to Trajan.³⁴

Τάμμ(ιος) Μαρτ(ιαλίς) στρ(ατηγοῖς) \...[.][...].(.) / [Ι.Ι] νομ(ῶν)
 χαίρε(ιν).
 ἐπὶ σωτηρίᾳ τοῦ σύνπαγτ(ος)
 ἀνθρώπων γένους ἵστε
 5 τὴν ἡγεμονίαν παρὰ τοῦ
 θεοῦ πατρὸς διαδεδέχθ(αι)
 Αὐτοκράτορα Καίσαρα
 Τραϊανὸν Ἀδριανὸν Ἀριστ(ον)
 Σεβαστὸν Γερμανικὸν Δακι-
 10 κὸν Παρθικόν. εὐχόμ[ενοι]
 οὖν πάσι θεοῖς αιώνιον
 αὐτοῦ τὴν διαμονὴν
 ἡμεῖν φιλαλθῆγαι
 στεφανηφορήσομ(εν)
 15 ἐφ' ἡμ(έρας) Ι, ὅπερ καὶ τοῖς
 ὑφ' ἐαυτοὺς νομ[οῖ]ς
 φανερὸν ποιήσητε.
 ἔτους) α Μεσορὴ
 ἐπαγο(μένων) β. vac. ?
 20 Λητο(πολίτου), Μεμφε[τ(ον)], Ἀρσι(νοίτου),]
 Ἀφροδ(ιτοπολίτου), Ἡρακλ(εοπολίτου), Οξυρυγ(χίτου),
 Οάσεω(ς) ζ νομ(ῶν), Κυνο(πολίτου),
 [Ἐρμ]ο(πολίτου) [-ca.? -]

Rammios Martialis to the *strategoi* ... of the districts. Greetings.

For the salvation of all humanity, know that the imperial rule has been taken over by Imperator Caesar Traianos Aristos Sebastos Germanicos Dacicos Parthicos from the god, his father. Therefore, praying to all the gods that his eternal permanence may be preserved for us, we shall wear garlands for ten days, which you will make known to the districts under your jurisdiction.

³³ P.Oxy. 55.3781 = TM 25505, Oxyrhynchus, ll7 CE. See Rea, *P.Oxy. 55:14–18*. The following sigla are used in the transcription of papyri: α(βγ) modern expansion of an abbreviation; [αβγ] text lost, restored by editor; [-ca.4-] or [...] approximate number of characters lost, cannot be restored; \ αβγ/ text added above the line in antiquity; αβγ underdotted by editor to indicate uncertain characters; [Ι.Ι] characters deleted in antiquity; vac. space left empty.

³⁴ See also SB 1.3924 (TM 23084, provenance unknown, 19 CE), which contains the famous Edict of Germanicus rejecting divine honours (ll. 31–45). Germanicus maintains that such honours are fitting only for his father, the saviour and benefactor of all humanity (ll. 38–40: τῶι σωτῆρι | ὄντως καὶ εὐεργέτη τοῦ σύνπαντος | τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένους). See Preisigke, *SB* 1:263–64.

Year 1, Mesore, 2nd intercalary day. Letopolite, Memphite, Arsinoite, Aphroditopolite, Heracleopolite, Oxyrhynchite, Oasis of the Heptanomia, Cynopolite, Hermopolite.

P.Oxy. 7.1021 is another notice of accession found in Oxyrhynchus, this time for Nero.³⁵ The notice refers to Nero as the one whom the world anticipated and hoped for (ll. 5–7) and his predecessor, Caligula, as “god manifest” (ll. 2–3):

ο μὲν ὀφειλόμενος
τοῖς προγόνοις καὶ ἐν-
φωνῆς θεὸς Καῖσαρ εἰς
ὑτοὺς κεχώρηκε,
5 οὐδὲ τῆς οἰκουμένης
καὶ προοδοκηθεὶς καὶ ἐλπισ-
θεὶς/ Αὐτοκράτωρ ἀποδέ-
διε/ικται, ἀγαθὸς
δαιμῶν δὲ τῆς
10 οὐκοιμένης [ἀρ]χὴν ἡῶν/
[[μεγις]] τε πάντων
ἀγαθῶν Νέρων
Καῖσαρ ἀποδέδεικται.

The god manifest, Caesar, who is due to his ancestors, has gone to join them, and the Emperor whom the world has both anticipated and hoped for has been proclaimed; the good genius of the world, the source of all good things, Nero Caesar, has been proclaimed.

However, documentary papyri have more to offer than mere support for attestations of language of the imperial cult already evident in epigraphical sources. The everyday documents written on papyrus and other materials shed light on the social, cultural, and hierarchical milieux in which the earliest Christians moved in a way that literary and epigraphical sources, which generally represent the elite of society, cannot. Approaching documentary papyri from a socio-historical rather than philological perspective allows us to hear first-hand the voices of those whose social status corresponds most closely with the protagonists of the NT.³⁶

Neil Elliott's *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* is one of the few NT empire-critical studies that not only cite papyri but use them for their socio-historical content rather than simply as a source of co-opted language.³⁷ Drawing on the work of Roman historian Ramsay MacMullen, Elliott cites an excerpt (ll. 13–18) from a papyrus petition, P.Mich 6.425, in

³⁵ P.Oxy. 7.1021 = TM 20321, Oxyrhynchus, 54 CE. See Hunt, *P.Oxy. 7:148–50*.

³⁶ See Bagnall, *Reading Papyri*; Todd M. Hickey, “Writing Histories from the Papyri,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 495–520, for approaching papyrology from a historical perspective.

³⁷ Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

which a villager complains about the treatment he has endured from a local tax collector.³⁸ I cite the text more fully here:

10 ἐντυγχάνω, κύριε, κατὰ Κάστορος χειριστοῦ κώμης Καρανίδος τῆς Ἡρακείδου μερίδος τοῦ Ἀρσινοίτου νομοῦ. ὅδε καταφρονήσας μου ὡς ἐπισυνούσι,
μονόφθαλμος γάρ ὣν τῷ δοκοῦντι ὄραν οὐ βλέπω ὡς ἐν ἀνφοτέροις πονηρὸν είναι ἀντικροις, ἡργολ[ά]βησέν με καὶ πρότερον ἐμὲ ἔξυβρείσας δημοσίᾳ καὶ τὴν μητέραν μου, μετὰ τὸ πλῆσταις αὐτὴν πληγαῖς αἰκίσασθαι
15 καὶ πέλυκι ὄλας μου τέσσαρες θύρας κατασχείσαι ὥστε ὄλην ἡμῶν τὴν οἰκίαν ἀνεπταμένην γενέσθαι καὶ εὐεπείβατον παντὶ κακού[ργῳ, τούτων] κατασχεισμένων καὶ κατενηγμένων ἡμῶν μηδὲν [όφειλόντων]
τῷ ταμείῳ, ὅθεν οὐδὲ σύμβολον παράξαι ἐτόλμησε [μὴ ἀδικεῖν δι'] αὐτοῦ ἐλέγχηται ἡ ἐργολαβητικέναι. διὸ, σωτῆρος τάξαντος τοὺς [ἀδικουμένους]
20 συ προσειέναι ἀδεῶς τῶν δικαίων τευχομένους, ἀξιώ ύ[πὸ σοῦ, κύριε,]
ἀκουσθῆναι καὶ ἐγδικηθῆναι ἵν' ὡς εὐεργετημένος, τὸν δε ἀ[ντίδικον πεμ-]
φθῆναι ἐξ αὐθεντίας σου ἐπὶ τὴν σήν διάγνωσιν.

I appeal, my lord, against Kastor, the tax collector's assistant of the village of Karanis in the district of Herakleides in the Arsinoite nome. This person held me in contempt as deformed for I only have one eye and although it looks like I can see, I cannot as I am utterly useless in both eyes. This person exploited me, having first been violent towards me and my mother in public, and after his mistreatment of her with numerous blows, he demolished all my four doors with an axe so that our entire house is wide open and accessible to every miscreant. These were demolished and we were beaten although we owed nothing to the fiscus, and for this reason he dared not even produce a receipt lest he be convicted through it of injustice or of extortion. Wherefore, since our saviour has ordained that those who are victims of injustice shall approach you without fear in order to obtain justice, I request, my lord, that I be heard and avenged by you, so that I may be the object of your beneficence, and that the defendant be sent by your authority for your examination.

Elliott appropriately uses this petition for illustrating the treatment of the Greco-Egyptian populace at the hands of the representatives of Rome and comments, too, on the level of deference required by the subordinate "in the elaborate rituals of respect and subjection" even in a legitimate appeal for justice.³⁹ Elliott makes inroads into the potential of documentary papyri for providing socio-historical rather than philological data for NT empire criticism. However, there is even more potential for the use of documentary papyri in empire-critical studies additional to illustrations of the power dynamic between subjugator and subjected.

³⁸ Elliott, *Arrogance of Nations*, 91–93; Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 10. P.Mich. 6.425 = TM 12263, Karanis, 198 CE. See Youtie and Pearl, *P.Mich.* 6:126–30.

³⁹ Elliott, *Arrogance of Nations*, 39, 92.

4 Papyri and Hidden Transcripts

The work of James C. Scott on public and hidden transcripts has informed much of the methodology adopted by NT empire critics.⁴⁰ Scott distinguishes between communication in the public domain (the public transcript) and that which takes place privately (the hidden transcript). The petition against the abusive assistant tax collector above, P.Mich 6.425, is an example of a public transcript of the subordinate – an avenue for protest against the dominating, albeit within strict parameters. The public transcript of P.Mich. 6.425 reflects communication between the subordinate and the dominating; hidden transcripts, however, reflect the communication within one of these groups. Hidden transcripts may be overt or veiled, and it is the proposal that a veiled hidden transcript of counter-imperial ideology exists in the NT that has attracted vociferous criticism, particularly in relation to Paul's letters.⁴¹

Laura Robinson questions the proposal by a number of empire critics that Paul coded his counter-imperial stance in order to avoid adverse repercussions if his letters were to fall into the wrong hands.⁴² Robinson examines and finds wanting the likelihood that Paul's letters might be intercepted on the road or his words denounced by someone who overheard them in a Christian gathering.⁴³ Robinson limits her discussion to the question of potential danger to Paul himself, but Christoph Heilig rightly asks the question: what about Paul's recipients?⁴⁴ Would they be in danger if Paul's words were overheard in their midst? Robinson, those she rebuts, and Heilig must, of necessity, operate in the realm of speculation, weighing possibility and probability, and Horsley bemoans the fact that "investigations into most places and periods are handicapped by the unavailability of sources for the hidden transcript of the subjugated."⁴⁵ Instead, it is the public transcript of the dominating group that is seen in "nearly all public inscriptions, coins, and most extant documents."⁴⁶ Documentary papyri, however, afford us

⁴⁰ See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁴¹ E.g., John M.G. Barclay, "Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul," in *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, WUNT 275 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 363–87; Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Laura Robinson, "Hidden Transcripts? The Supposedly Self-Censoring Paul and Rome as Surveillance State in Modern Pauline Scholarship," *NTS* 67 (2021): 55–72.

⁴² Robinson, "Hidden Transcripts?"

⁴³ Robinson, "Hidden Transcripts?," 67–70.

⁴⁴ Robinson, "Hidden Transcripts?," 69; Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire*, 28.

⁴⁵ Richard A. Horsley, "Introduction: Jesus, Paul, and the 'Arts of Resistance': Leaves from the Notebook of James C. Scott," in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, SemeiaSt (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 13.

⁴⁶ Horsley, "Introduction," 13. See Clinton Burnett's chapter in this volume.

the opportunity to peer over the shoulders of subordinated people in Roman Egypt and read their hidden transcripts. Their personal letters sometimes detail the small acts by which they express resistance to the dominant power and provide some means of assessing whether the senders felt vulnerable to potential surveillance and punishment for themselves or their recipients.

PTebt 2.315 is a personal letter sent to a friend with some degree of influence over a Roman official.⁴⁷ The letter concerns the annual declaration that temple priests had to submit to the Roman authorities at the end of each tax year. These declarations would typically include an inventory of temple objects, a statement of financial operations, and the temple budget.⁴⁸ Lines 7–31 read:

νῦν δέ
 [μετὰ σ]π[ο]υδῆς γράφω ὅπως
 [μὴ μερ]ιμνῆς, ἐγὼ γάρ σε ἀσκυλ-
 10 [τον] πο[ι]ήσω. γείνωσκε γάρ
 [ἐξε]ταστὴν [τ]ῶν χειρισμῶν
 [τ]ῶν ἐν τοῖς ι]ερ[ο]ῖς εἰσεληλυθέ-
 ναι καὶ μ[έ]λλα[ι]ν καὶ εἰς τὴν με-
 [ρί]δα σου ἔρχ[ε]σθαι. τοιγαροῦν
 15 [μη]δ/ἐν ταραχ[θ]ῆς, ἐγὼ γάρ [σ]ε
 [ἀ]παλλάξω. ἐὰν μὲν οὖν σχολὴν
 ἄγης γράψας [σ]ου τὰ βιβλία ἀνελ-
 θε πρὸς ἐμέ. ὁ γάρ ἄνθρωπος λεί-
 αν ἔστι[ν] αὐστηρός. ἐὰν δέ σε
 20 τι κατέχῃ διαπέμψαι μοι αὐ-
 τὰ καγώ σε ἐκπλέξω. ἐγένετο
 γάρ μου φίλος. ἐὰν δέ σε περὶ τοῦ δα-
 πανήματος [ΙΙσε] ἔχῃ καὶ μὴ ἔχῃς
 ἐπὶ τοῦ παρόντος γράψον μοι καὶ
 25 καὶ[γ]ώ σε τὰ [ν]ῦν ὡς καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ πρώτου
 [ἀ]παλλάξω. ἐστευσα δέ σοι γράψαι
 [ὅπ]ως μὴ αὐτ[ὸς] φανῆς πρὸν γάρ
 [α]ὐτὸ[ν] π[ρό]ς σε ἐλθῖν ἐγὼ αὐτὸν ποι-
 [ήσ]ω ἐκπλέξαι σε. ἔχι γάρ συστατι-
 30 κάς [ὅ]πως τὸν ἀπιθούντα μετὰ
 φρουρᾶς τῷ ἀρχιερῆ πεμπιν.

Now I am writing to you with haste so that you will not be anxious for I will keep you trouble free. Please know that an auditor of declarations in the temples has come and that he is also intending to go to your district. But do not be troubled by any of this as I will get you off. If, therefore, you have time, write up your books and come up to me, for the man is exceedingly exacting. If, however, something holds you up,

⁴⁷ PTebt. 2.315 = TM 28413, Tebtynis, 2nd century CE. See Grenfell and Hunt, *PTebt. 2*: 114–16.

⁴⁸ See Chris Eckerman, “A Temple Declaration from Early Roman Egypt,” *BASP* 49 (2021): 55–62, for a typical example of a temple declaration.

send them on to me and I will get you through, for he has become my friend. If you have expenses but no means at the moment, write to me and I will get you off these matters now as I did before. I am hurrying to write to you so that you will not have to appear yourself, since before he comes to you, I will get him to let you off. He has instructions to send anyone who is non-compliant to the high priest.

This letter demonstrates resistance in the form of planned civil disobedience by both sender and recipient. The same act of resistance has obviously been executed previously (ll. 27–29), presumably with no adverse repercussions. There appears to be no attempt to veil or encode the intended act in the letter, so it is reasonable to surmise that the sender was not concerned about the letter falling into the wrong hands. There appears to be an assumption, too, that the recipient's fellow priests would be complicit by not insisting that this priest facilitate an in-person visit by the inspector. This letter suggests no concern about interception or danger to the recipient himself or his fellow priests. The priest's prior "fudging" of the accounts makes the lack of veiled hidden transcript in this letter particularly significant. Egyptian priests enjoyed a privileged status in Roman Egypt with various tax concessions that made them targets of the Roman practice to carefully police the members of tax-advantaged groups.⁴⁹ One might imagine it to have been expedient for this priest to remain "squeaky clean" in his dealings with the financial authorities.

A similar cavalier attitude towards potential surveillance is apparent in P.Mich. 3.203.⁵⁰ This papyrus is another letter detailing a planned conspiracy, although not between sender and recipient; in this letter, the sender merely informs the recipient, his mother, of his plan. The letter is written by a certain Satornilos, who is a soldier in the Roman army and stationed in the far south of Egypt.⁵¹ Writing sometime between 114 and 116 CE, Satornilos expresses his earnest desire to visit his mother, Aphrodous, who lives in Karanis, in the north of Egypt. Satornilos mentions his intention to come to his mother with letters – a statement that has puzzled commentators since the letter's publication in 1927.⁵² Lines 7–16 read:

Θεῶν θελόντων ἐὰν εύρω εὐκαιρείαν ἐργασείαν διδώ-
ν]αι ἔρχομαι μετ' ἐπιστολῶν πρὸς ὑμᾶς. γεινώσκιν σε θέλω ὅτι
εἰδοὺ τρεῖς μῆνες ἀφ' ὅτε ἡλαγμαι εἰ[ζ] Ψέλκιν καὶ οὕπω εὔρηκα
10 [ε]ύκαιρε[α]ν τοῦ ἐλθεῖν πρὸς ὑμᾶς. ἐφοβήθην ἄρτει ἐλθεῖν ἐπὶ λέγου-

⁴⁹ Andreas Jördens, "Status and Citizenship," in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 257; Anna Dolganov, "Documenting Roman Citizenship," in *Roman and Local Citizenship in the Long Second Century CE*, ed. Myles Lavan and Clifford Ando, OSSE (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 198.

⁵⁰ P.Mich. 3.203 = TM 21342, Pselkis, 114–116 CE. See Winter, *P.Mich.* 3:255–59.

⁵¹ See Nigel Pollard, "Military Institutions and Warfare: Graeco-Roman," in *A Companion to Ancient Egypt*, ed. Alan A. Lloyd, BCAW 1 (Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 2010), 452–57, for discussion of the role of the Roman army in Egypt during the Principate.

⁵² John Garrett Winter, "In the Service of Rome: Letters from the Michigan Collection of Papyri," *CP* 22 (1927): 249–54.

[σι]ν οἱ ἡγεμῶν ἐν τῷ πόρῳ ἐστίν, μὴ λάβῃ ἀπ' ἐμοῦ τὰς ἐπιστολὰς
 [κ]αὶ ἀπολύσει με πρὸς τὰς σημέας καὶ κενῆν δαπάνην ποιήσω.
 [κ]αὶ μὴ ἔλθω πρ[ὸ]ς ὑμᾶς ἔως Ἀθύρ πηγός, ἔχω ἄλλους δέκα ὥκ-
 15 [τ]ὰς μῆνες εἰς τ[ὰ] πραισδία καθήμενος μέχρει εἰς Ψέλκιν εἰσέλ-
 [θ]ω καὶ ἔλθω [πρ]ὸς ὑμᾶς.

The gods willing, if I find a favourable time to work it, I am coming to you with letters. I want you to know that it is already three months since I transferred to Pselkis and I have not yet found a favourable time to come to you. I was afraid to come right now because they are saying that the prefect is on the move and I fear that he might take the letters from me and send me back to the troops, and I will have incurred an expense to no avail. And if I do not come to you by the month of Hathyr, I have another eighteen months sitting in the garrison until I enter Pselkis again and come to you.

The editor of the letter suggested that Satornilos was planning an absence without leave: hence, Satornilos's fear of the prefect.⁵³ However, this does not adequately account for the reference to letters. A more satisfactory explanation is that Satornilos has devised a cunning plan to allow him to leave his post under the guise of legitimate military business to make the visit to his mother before an eighteen-month stint of garrison guard duty prevents him from doing so.⁵⁴ It appears that Satornilos is planning to bribe the clerk or officer in charge of organising military despatches to the prefect of Egypt in Alexandria such that Satornilos can be a member of the delivery party travelling north. The route would take him past Karanis and afford him the opportunity to visit Aphrodous on the way.

Rumours have reached Satornilos, however, that the prefect has already departed from Alexandria to head south. If Satornilos's party encountered the prefect en route, the military despatches would be handed over at that point, and Satornilos's (most likely hefty) bribe to the official would have been in vain. Thus, Satornilos needs to time the execution of his plan carefully. A wry observation later in the letter (ll. 19–21) confirms this interpretation:

πάντα εἰς τὴν στρατείαν
 20 [μετ' εὐκ]αιρείας [γ]είνεται. ἐὰν σχῶ τὴν εὐκαιρείαν ἔρχομαι πρὸς ὑ-
 [μᾶς].

Everything in the army comes about with opportune moment. If I get an opportune moment, I'll come to you.

Like the well-connected friend of PTebt 2.315, Satornilos does not seem to be concerned about his letter falling into the wrong hands. His wording is perhaps a little more circumspect than that of PTebt 2.315, but that perception may just be due to our looking over his shoulder. We may reasonably assume that the mes-

⁵³ Winter, "In the Service," 249–50.

⁵⁴ Herbert C. Youtie, "P. Mich. III 203," *ZPE* 20 (1976): 290–91.

sage would have been clear to both his mother and anyone else reading the letter. It is reasonable to assume, too, that Satornilos's plan carries some risk, not the least because presumably the other soldiers in Satornilos's garrison would know that he was not normally a member of the despatch party. Yet Satornilos evidently feels sufficiently confident to plan, execute, and write about his act of resistance against the leave provisions of his unit.

Of course, neither of these letters contains an ideological exposition in the way that most of Paul's letters do; in this respect, they bear more resemblance to Paul's letter to Philemon. Nevertheless, Paul's appeal to Philemon to treat Onesimus as no longer a slave, but as a dear brother (Phlm 15–16), challenges the hierarchical structures of Roman society (irrespective of whether Paul's appeal is construed as a request for Onesimus's manumission), just as the proposed acts of resistance outlined in these two epistolary papyri challenge the *status quo* of the fiscal and military structures under which the letter writers' daily lives played out.

John Barclay, who resists the idea of a veiled hidden transcript in Paul's letters, prefers to describe Paul's writings as an "undisguised," "pure form" of Christian hidden transcript; that is, the transcript operates entirely within the private sphere of the group – "offstage."⁵⁵ Barclay bases this analysis on his assumption that Paul's letters were unlikely to fall into the hands of people external to the group. However, Heilig suggests that Paul's letters, "though a form of private correspondence, were *affected* by public scrutiny and the rules of public discourse [italics original]" because the gatherings of the Christian communities to whom Paul wrote were open to outsiders.⁵⁶ These two epistolary papyri provide commentary on both these scenarios. If, as "pure" hidden written transcripts, they refer to communication entirely within the private sphere of the priest and his friend in high places, and Satornilos and his mother, then they offer a small glimpse into the confidence that the two letter writers felt on behalf of their recipients and themselves that their correspondence was safe. If, however, as intended enacted transcripts, they were affected by public scrutiny – say, to the potentially unsympathetic gaze of Satornilos's fellow soldiers or possible antagonistic scrutiny of his commanding officer – then these letters indicate that their writers felt nevertheless unthreatened. Thus, these types of letters are useful for NT empire-critical studies for their small, but first-hand glimpses into the lived realities of people operating in circumstances closer to those of the earliest Christians than twenty-first-century commentators.

⁵⁵ Barclay, "Why the Roman Empire," 382–83.

⁵⁶ Christoph Heilig, *Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul*, WUNT II/392 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 63–64.

5 Papyri, Social Identity, and Status

Advocating for the use of Scott's work on domination and resistance in NT empire-critical studies, Horsley commented in 2004 that Scott "can help biblical scholars expand the spectrum of social reality that they deal with" and "enlarge their field of vision to include the emotional-cultural dimension of subordinated people's lives."⁵⁷ However, the adoption of Scott's social categories (subordinate and dominating) for NT empire critics has encouraged a rather too simplistic bifurcation of dominating and subordinate groups that understates the complexities of interconnected identities, particularly in relation to Paul and his letters. BGU 3.747 (ca. 137–139 CE) illustrates such complexities.⁵⁸

The recto of BGU 3.747 contains a copy of a letter from the *strategos* (a government administrative official who represented the prefect) of the Koptites nome, a certain Ptolemaios, to the prefect Avidius Heliodorus, along with the prefect's reply on the verso.⁵⁹

Ptolemaios informs Avidius Heliodorus that some of the tax collectors appointed in his nome – Romans, Alexandrians, and military veterans – are refusing to heed his orders or allow him to audit their accounts. The reason, he states, is that they do not consider that they should be treated like the local Egyptian tax collectors (r. col. 2, ll. 5–6: *κατὰ τὸ ίσα τοῖς ἐνχωρίοις πράκτωρσιν* "equal to the provincial tax collectors").⁶⁰ The recalcitrant tax collectors enjoyed various privileges in Roman Egypt, which would have been available to them as either Roman citizens (military veterans could be granted Roman citizenship) or as citizens of one of the three (later four) *poleis* of Egypt (Alexandria, Naukratis, Ptolemais Hermiou, and after 130 CE, Antinoopolis).⁶¹ These privileges included exemptions from the poll tax introduced by the Romans and from certain state-imposed public duties.

From Ptolemaios's complaint, it is evident that as citizens, these tax collectors thought they should be exempt from more of the duties or obligations that they still shared with non-citizens. From Avidius Heliodorus's reply, it is evident that the prefect thought otherwise:

τῶν ίς τὰς δημοσίας χρείας κατιστανομένων
καὶ μὴ βουλομενους ὁμοίως τοῖς ἄλλοις πρα-
γματικοῖς ὑπακούειν δύνασαι παραστῆσαι
τῷ κρατίστῳ ἐπιστρατήγῳ, ὃς ἐπ[α]ναγκάσει
5 αὐτοὺς τὰ προσήκοντα αὐτοῖς ἐκτελεῖν.

⁵⁷ Horsley, "Introduction," 8–9.

⁵⁸ BGU 3.747 = TM 20062, Koptos, 137–139 CE. See BGU 3:54–55.

⁵⁹ Avidius Heliodorus served as prefect in Egypt from 137–142 CE.

⁶⁰ The legal identifier "Egyptian" applied to the culturally mixed Greco-Egyptian population in Roman Egypt.

⁶¹ See Jördens, "Status and Citizenship."

In respect of those who are appointed to public duties but who do not want to obey like the other agents of the State, you can bring them before the *epistrategos* who will force them to fulfil their required duties.⁶²

The dynamics of the circumstances represented by the letters on this papyrus illustrate the unwieldiness of a simplistic bifurcation of power relations. Here, the hierarchy of dominating and subordinate groups accounts for the wayward tax collectors' presumption that their privileges over those whose legal identity was Egyptian should be increased. However, the military veterans themselves would culturally have been Greco-Egyptians whose legal identity had changed on account of their having served in the Roman army, and now they identify themselves with the social elite. As far as legal status is concerned, they have switched sides from subordinate to dominating, and now it seems that their new social identity as members of the elite "trumps" any prior loyalties to their subordinate social origins.

Complicating the picture further, though, are the tax collectors' acts of resistance against the Roman system of partial privileges in which they find themselves. Their acts of resistance express critique of that system: they are at odds with the element of Roman imperial ideology that still requires them to fulfil duties to the State in the same way that non-citizens must. On the one hand, the tax collectors enjoy some benefits of the system of Roman social elitism; on the other, they express dissatisfaction with that system. And their expression of dissatisfaction has teeth: Ptolemaios (ll. 14–17) worries that their failure to discharge their duties is hindering and jeopardising imperial matters. The new allegiances of the recalcitrant tax collectors only stretch as far as their new legal and social identities benefit them, but they are soon to learn that they are biting the hand that feeds them.

Another letter demonstrates similar complexities. In P.Oxy. 42.3061 (1st century CE), a certain Heraklas writes to his son, Archelaos, asking for a favour (ll. 8–14):⁶³

καλῶς ποιήσεις πέμψας μοι
έρημοφύλακα σὺν διπλώματι
10 έπι Λαστᾶν Θώνιος ἀπὸ Τήγεως,
έπει ύβριν μοι οὐ μεικρὰν
παρέσχεν. ὅρα οὖν μὴ ἀμελή-
σῃς. οἰδας γὰρ τὸ τῶν Αἰγυπτίων).

Please send me a desert guard with orders against Lastas son of Theon from Teis since he has meted out no little violence towards me. Therefore, see that you do not neglect to do this for you know what Egyptians are like.

⁶² An *epistrategos* was the governor of one of the three administrative districts into which Roman Egypt was divided. He was appointed from the Roman equestrian class.

⁶³ P.Oxy. 42.3061 = TM 25081, Oxyrhynchus, 1st century CE. See Parsons, *P.Oxy.* 42:150–51.

The names of both father and son indicate that culturally they are most likely Greco-Egyptian. However, Archelaos is known from another letter, P.Oxy. 42.3062, to be the secretary to the *strategos* of the Panopolite nome and friends with the secretary of the court clerk. *Strategoi* in the first century CE were Alexandrian citizens; thus, Archelaos moves in elevated circles. It seems that both Archelaos and his father have adopted the social snobbery of the elite on account of their upward mobility.⁶⁴

P.Tebt. 2.314 (2nd century CE) reminds us that even within a subordinate group, status, or the desire for status, may blur other identity markers.⁶⁵ In this letter, a certain Chareas writes to an unknown recipient to inform him of the lengths he has gone to in order to secure a young boy's admission to the Egyptian priesthood. The letter is assumed to be part of an archive belonging to priests of the Soknebtynis temple in the second century CE.⁶⁶

Χαιρέας Μα[... τῶ] τιμιω-
τάτω πλεῖστα χ[α]ίριν.
πιστεύω σε μὴ ἀγνοεῖν
ὅσον κάμ[α] τον ἥνεγκα
5 ἔως τὴν [π]ερι[το]μὴν
ἐκπλέξω ἐπιζητοῦν-
τος τοῦ [ἀ]ρχιερέως
ὸν παιδα ε[ι]δίν, τῆς
δὲ τῶν φιλων σπου-
10 δῆς τυχόντος ἐπε-
τύχαμεν.

Chaireas to my most esteemed Ma ..., many greetings. I believe you are not at all unaware how much trouble I had to get the circumcision sorted out because the high priest required seeing the boy, but we succeeded due to the efforts of our friends.

By the second century CE, membership of the Egyptian priestly elite was limited by prefectoral edict, most likely because of the tax concessions that priestly status conferred. Access to the priesthood was controlled by a Roman official of equestrian rank known as the “high priest of Alexandria and all of Egypt,” who regulated the practice of circumcision (a pre-requisite for admission). This letter suggests that the Greco-Egyptian writer's own social status afforded him the capacity to exert some influence over a highly regulated process to secure the sought-after socioreligious status.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Jane Rowlandson, “Dissing the Egyptians: Legal, Ethnic, and Cultural Identities in Roman Egypt,” in *Creating Ethnicities and Identities in the Roman World*, ed. Andrew Gardner, Edward Herring, and Kathryn Lomas (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2013), 238.

⁶⁵ P.Tebt. 2.314 = TM 2842, Tebtynis, 2nd century CE. See Grenfell and Hunt, *P.Tebt.*, 2:114–16.

⁶⁶ Birgit Feucht, “Kronion and Isidora, Priests of Soknebtynis,” TM Arch 279 in *TM Archives*, LHPG, 2012, <https://www.trismegistos.org/arch/archives/pdf/279.pdf>.

⁶⁷ See April Pudsey, “Children's Cultures in Roman Egypt,” in *Popular Culture in the Ancient*

One final example is a soldier who is known from two letters he writes back home to his family: BGU 2.483 and BGU 2.632 (second century CE).⁶⁸ The first letter sends details of the soldier's recruitment into the Roman fleet *Classis Mis-enensis*:

recto

Ἄπιστον Ἐπιμάχῳ τῷ πατρὶ καὶ
κυρίῳ πλεῖστα χαίρειν. πρὸ μὲν πάν-
των εὔχομαι σε ὑγιαίνειν καὶ διὰ παντὸς
ἐρωμένον εὐτυχεῖν μετὰ τῆς ἀδελφῆς
5 μου καὶ τῆς θυγατρὸς αὐτῆς καὶ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ
μου. εὐχαριστῶ τῷ κυρίῳ Σεράπιδι
ὅτι μου κινδυνεύσαντος εἰς θάλασσαν
ἔσωσε εὐθέως. ὅτε εἰσῆλθον εἰς Μη-
σήνους, ἔλαβα βιάτικον παρὰ Καίσαρος
10 χρυσοῦς τρείς καὶ καλῶς μοι ἔστιν.
ἐρωτῶ σε οὖν, κύριε μου πάτηρ,
γράψον μοι ἐπιστόλιον πρῶτον
μὲν περὶ τῆς σωτηρίας σου, δεύ-
τερον περὶ τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου,
15 τρίτον, ἵνα σου προσκυνήσω τὴν
χεραν, ὅτι με ἐπαιδευσας καλῶς,
καὶ ἐκ τούτου ἐλπίζω ταχὺ προκό-
σαι τῶν θεῶν θελόντων. ἀσπασαι
Καπίτων[α] πόλλὰ καὶ τοὺς ἀδελφούς
20 [μου] καὶ Σε[ρηνί]λλαν καὶ το[ὺς] φίλους μο[νού].
ἐπεμψά σοι[ι εἰ] κόνιν μ[ον] διὰ Εὔκτη-
μονος. ἐσ[τ]ι[γ] μου ὄνομα Ἀντῶνις Μά-
ξιμος. ἐρρώσθαι σε εὔχομαι.
κεντυρί(α) Ἀθηνονίκη.

verso

ε[ις] Φ[ιλ]αδελφίαν Ἐπιμάχῳ ἀπὸ Ἀπίστονος νίοῦ

Apion, to his father and lord, Epimachos, many greetings. Before all else, I pray that you are well and that you may always be strong and healthy together with my sister and her daughter and my brother. I give thanks to the Lord Sarapis because he rescued me immediately when I was in danger at sea. When I arrived at Misenum, I received three gold pieces from Caesar for travelling expenses, and it is well with me. Therefore, I ask you, my lord father, write me a note first about your health, second about my siblings, third, so that I can make obeisance for your handwriting because you educated me well, and because of this I hope to advance quickly, gods willing. Give Kaptiton many greetings and my siblings and Serenilla and my friends. I sent my portrait to you via Euktemonos. My name is Antonius Maximus. I pray that you are well. Company Athonike.

World, ed. Lucy Grig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 226–30, for a discussion of the desirability among parents for their sons to be admitted to the priesthood.

⁶⁸ BGU 2.483 = TM 28137, Misenum?, 2nd century CE. See BGU 2.84–85. BGU 2.632 = TM 28196, Arsinoites, 2nd century CE. See BGU 2.297.

verso

To Philadelphia, to Epimachos from Apion, his son.

We learn from this letter that the soldier is Greco-Egyptian. Following his recruitment to the Misenum fleet, he has been given the Roman name Antonius Maximus. The interval between the first and second letter is unknown, but sufficient time has elapsed by then for Apion to be married with three children. In the second letter, the soldier uses his Roman name in the salutation to his family and tells them that his youngest child, a son, has been named Maximus – after his father (BGU 2.632, ll. 17–18). Apion prayed to the Egyptian god Sarapis on his way to Misenum, but on his honourable discharge from the navy, Antonius Maximus can expect to be granted Roman citizenship. As Katrijn Vandorpe asks, “Is Apion an Egyptian, a Greek, or a Roman in the making?”⁶⁹

Thus, documentary papyri attest that people do not always fall into neat categories – a phenomenon illustrated by Paul’s own circumstances. As a Jewish Christian, Paul moved within a sub-group of a subordinate culture. As a Roman citizen, however, he was at least nominally associated with the dominating culture and took advantage of that citizenship both when he was arrested without due process in Philippi (Acts 16:37) and Jerusalem (Acts 22:25–29; 25:1–11).⁷⁰ Thus, documentary papyri provide insights into how people in the ancient world navigated the complexities of interconnected identities, sometimes displaying only inconsistencies where one might expect incompatibilities. The voices emerging from these papyri might help empire critics explore how Paul himself navigated his interconnected identities and might promote further nuancing of Paul’s stance towards the empire.

6 The Potential of Documentary Papyri for Future Empire-Critical Studies

The bifurcation of a population into subordinate or dominating risks impeding the identification of critiques additional to or other than counter-imperial sentiment, but an awareness of the complexities of interconnected identities as illustrated by documentary papyri opens up further possibilities for identifying ideological critique in the NT.

⁶⁹ Katrijn Vandorpe, “Identity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 260.

⁷⁰ See Peter van Minnen, “Paul the Roman Citizen,” *JNST* 17 (1995): 43–52, for persuasive evidence for the historicity of the Acts narrative with respect to Paul’s citizenship. By happy coincidence, van Minnen is a papyrologist.

Cynthia Long Westfall examines the Letter of James from the perspective of economic conditions in the Roman Empire.⁷¹ Her purpose is to demonstrate an anti-imperial perspective in the letter towards the Roman Empire and to the local Jewish elite because of their corruption by the imperial ideology.⁷² Westfall rightly cautions against viewing every reference to “the rich” in James as directed at the social elite,⁷³ but she limits her application of James’s critique to those Jewish Christians who have been influenced by “the entitlement and pride inherent in the Roman Empire’s economic system.”⁷⁴ This application is unnecessarily restrictive: the interconnected identities of Jewish Christians in the Roman Empire suggest an additional critique in the Letter of James.

The letter is heavily influenced by OT Jewish wisdom traditions. By the first century, however, a corollary to the teaching that the righteous prosper and the wicked perish (as described, for example, in Psalm 1) had developed: prosperity indicates that one is righteous, but suffering is punishment for wickedness. This perspective lies behind the question asked by Jesus’s disciples about the man with congenital blindness: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2 NRSV) and accounts for the shock that the ending to the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16–20) would have engendered in Jesus’s hearers. The first-century Jewish audience gathered around Jesus would have expected a story in which God continued to bless with health and longevity any person whose land had produced a bumper harvest. Yet, the protagonist suffers an untimely death.

The recipients of James’s letter, characterised by interconnected identities, would have been likely influenced by corresponding socio-religious factors: not only the cultural values embedded in the Roman Empire’s economic system, but a Jewish sapiential perspective that complemented those values. The letter of James, therefore, critiques the local Jewish elite not only because of their corruption by the imperial ideology, but also because of their faulty theology. Thus, the evidence of multiple interconnected identities as evidenced by documentary papyri allows for the identification of more nuanced ideological critique.

This chapter has considered papyrological evidence drawn from the corpus of documentary papyri as a whole. However, one subset of documentary papyri aids in the identification of specifically Jewish anti-imperial sentiment and deserves brief mention. The *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* (CPJ) is a resource (in five volumes to date) that aims eventually to collate all documentary papyri with

⁷¹ Cynthia Long Westfall, “Running the Gamut: The Varied Responses to Empire in Jewish Christianity,” in *Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Cynthia Long Westfall, McMaster New Testament Studies 10 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 230–58.

⁷² Westfall, “Running the Gamut,” 236–37.

⁷³ Westfall, “Running the Gamut,” 234.

⁷⁴ Westfall, “Running the Gamut,” 236.

a Jewish connection.⁷⁵ Some papyri display overt expressions of anti-imperial sentiment, such as those written during the Bar Kochba Period found in the so-called Cave of Letters. Others contain the kind of implicit evidence illustrated by the examples of Greco-Egyptian letters presented in this chapter. A very recently published document not yet collated in CPJ, P.Cotton, contains notes of a second-century trial in Judea of two men for tax evasion (they were charged with failing to pay the slave manumission tax).⁷⁶ The act of resistance represented by this document may shed light on the exchange between Jesus and some Pharisees and Herodians over paying taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13–17 par.) and could support interpretations of this pericope that understand Jesus's response as a reframing of anti-imperial action. If tax evasion were a reasonably commonplace form of anti-imperial resistance in first-century Judea, then Jesus's command to adhere to the topsy-turvy values of the kingdom of God constitutes anti-imperial resistance *ipso facto*; there is no need to engage in acts such as tax evasion.

Some caveats must, however, be placed on the use of documentary papyri in NT empire-critical studies. The documents are occasional rather than ideological in nature; they are often lacunose; and they can be difficult to interpret. Letters were written between correspondents who did not spell out their exact circumstances for a readership more than two thousand years removed, and some imagination may be required to fill in the blanks. Occasionally, subsequent scholars may surmise a different interpretation to that of the original editor. But these limitations are outweighed by the unique access that documentary papyri provide to those whose voices we do not typically hear in literary and epigraphic sources.

7 Conclusion

Since the pioneering work of Deissmann in the early twentieth century, documentary papyri have been recognised as invaluable resources for studying everyday life in the ancient world. However, in NT empire-critical studies, the vast corpus of documentary papyri seems to be viewed as the poor cousin to other documentary sources such as inscriptions and coins. This chapter has demonstrated that papyri may be legitimately used to support a co-opted language approach to empire-critical studies, but they possess even greater potential for

⁷⁵ Tcherikover, Viktor A., Tal Ilan, and Noah Hacham, eds., *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Jerusalem: Magnes; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1957–2022).

⁷⁶ Anna Dolganov et al., “Forgery and Fiscal Fraud in Iudea and Arabia on the Eve of the Bar Kokhba Revolt: Memorandum and Minutes of a Trial before a Roman Official (P.Cotton),” *Tyche* 38 (2023): 37–171.

contributing to such studies when they are viewed from a socio-historical perspective.

Documentary papyri allow access to the hidden transcripts of everyday people in the ancient world. When these hidden transcripts recorded on papyrus refer to various acts of resistance against imperial structures, they provide parallels against which to assess the hidden transcripts of the earliest Christians as recorded in the NT. Documentary papyri also provide insights into the lived realities of people juggling the demands and priorities of multiple interconnected identities. This chapter has argued that greater awareness of the influences of interconnected identities on the behaviour and attitudes of people in the ancient world may help empire-critical scholars avoid an over-simplistic and reductionist interpretation of the behaviour and attitudes of the NT protagonists in relation to the Roman Empire. Finally, this chapter has shown that these interconnected identities mean that an anti-imperial critique does not exclude the critique of additional ideologies at the same time.

It is my hope that the increasing number of resources that explore how documentary papyri inform the world of the NT might pique the interest of empire-critical scholars such that documentary papyri will enjoy increasing representation in future empire-critical studies and their potential be fully realised.

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Epigraphy

Engraved for All Time

D. Clint Burnett

Greek and Latin inscriptions are a vital source for reconstructing the history, culture, and cultic systems of the Greco-Roman world. The reasons for their significance are fourfold. First, inscriptions are direct witnesses of antiquity that, unlike the New Testament documents, have not passed through scribal hands. Therefore, when one looks at an inscription, one is seeing a tangible, autographic piece of the classical world that, unless it has been altered or damaged, looks much the same as on the day it was produced. Second, the number of inscriptions that have survived from the Greco-Roman world is astonishing. According to one recent estimation, over five hundred thousand Greek and Latin inscriptions from the Classical, Hellenistic, and Roman eras of history have been discovered and more are found every year.¹ To put this figure into perspective, it is one hundred times greater than the approximate number of surviving New Testament manuscripts, which is over five thousand.² In addition, what is startling about the large number of surviving inscriptions is that it represents only a small fraction of what once existed in the classical world.³ Third, the content of inscriptions varies greatly, from messages scratched on the walls of buildings in ancient cities to official government documents displayed in agorae and fora, and almost everything in between. In fact, B. H. McLean observes that there is not an “aspect of ancient life on which epigraphy does not bear.”⁴ The variegated nature of inscriptional content is due to the fact that governments and private individu-

¹ John Bodel, “Epigraphy and the Ancient Historian,” in *Epigraphic Evidence: Ancient History from Inscriptions*, ed. John Bodel (London: Routledge, 2001), 2, 8. As of this writing, archaeologists in Germany announced the discovery of the oldest Christian artifact from northern Europe, a third century AD inscription on a silver amulet. For more information, see <https://www.clintburnett.com/2024/12/15/oldest-christian-artifact-in-northern-europe-and-st-pauls-letter-to-the-philippians/>.

² Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction of the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 74.

³ One of the greatest epigraphers of all time, Louis Robert (“Les épigraphies et L'épigraphie grecque et romaine,” in *Opera minora selecta. Epigraphie et antiquités grecque*, 7 vols. [Amsterdam: AM Hakkert, 1990] 5:66) calls the Greco-Roman world a “civilisation de l'épigraphie.”

⁴ B. H. McLean, *An Introduction to Greek Epigraphy of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods from Alexander the Great down to the Reign of Constantine (323 B.C.–A.D. 337)* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 1.

als, aristocrats and plebs, men and women, freepersons and slaves set up inscriptions. Finally, inscriptions are a vital historical dataset because they are contextual documents. That is, they are texts that particular persons, associations, or governmental bodies at particular times had engraved on particular media often embedded in particular monuments at particular locations for particular reasons. As such, inscriptions, as well as archaeology and coins, are indispensable for reconstructing the unique social histories of regions and cities of the Greco-Roman world that surviving literary sources ignore by providing evidence for local practices, traditions, and cultic rituals.

For the above reasons, inscriptions afford us the opportunity to reconstruct ancient conceptions of imperialism from direct sources that reflect a wider perspective than that of Greek and Roman aristocratic men (who are responsible for most surviving ancient literature) from places outside the most historically important cities of the classical world such as Rome. As will be evident, these conceptions are almost universally pro-imperial, and any negative sentiments found in inscriptions are made from a positive imperialistic context and directed against specific empires or their leaders. To present these findings, I have structured this essay in four main sections. In the first, “Introducing Inscriptions,” I discuss introductory issues related to inscriptions from the Greco-Roman world. The second, “Discerning Anti-imperial Sentiments in Inscriptions,” examines inscriptional evidence for anti-imperial sentiments, which, as we shall see, is virtually non-existent. In the third section, “Inscriptions and Anti-imperial Sentiments in the New Testament,” I discuss the implications of this lack of anti-imperial sentiments in inscriptions and the impact of these data on interpreting the New Testament with three examples. Finally, the “Conclusion” summarizes my findings.

1 Introducing Inscriptions

The first issue to address in introducing inscriptions is to pause and define what an inscription is.⁵ An efficient way to do so is to consider the etymologies of

⁵ For introductions to Greek and Latin inscriptions, see Giancarlo Susini, *The Roman Stonecutter: An Introduction to Latin Epigraphy*, trans. A. M. Dabrowski (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973); Arthur E. Gordon, *Illustrated Introduction to Latin Epigraphy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); B. F. Cook, *Greek Inscriptions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Robert, “épigraphies,” 5:65–109; Lawrence Keppie, *Understanding Roman Inscriptions* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); A. Geoffrey Woodhead, *The Study of Greek Inscriptions*, 2nd ed. (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1992); Bodel, ed., *Epigraphic Evidence*; McLean, *Introduction*; Alison E. Cooley, *The Cambridge Manual of Latin Epigraphy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Christer Bruun and Jonathan Edmondson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Epigraphy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015); D. Clint Burnett, *Studying the New Testament through Inscriptions: An Introduction* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2020).

the English word “inscription” (German *Inschrift*) and its synonym, “epigraph” (German *Epigraf*). The former derives from the ancient Latin verb *inscribo* and noun *inscriptio*, which mean “to write, inscribe” and “a writing upon,” respectively.⁶ The latter term comes from the ancient Greek noun ἐπιγραφή, which consists of the preposition ἐπί, meaning “on,” and the noun γραφή, meaning “writing.” Thus, by ancient standards, an “inscription” and an “epigraph” are a “writing on/upon” something.⁷ The modern study of these engraved messages is called “epigraphy” and a person who devotes their professional life to the study of them is an “epigrapher.” The materials on which ancient inscriptions were inscribed vary, but the commonest media are stone, especially marble and limestone among ancient Greeks and Romans, and bronze tablets, which was a material that ancient Romans used often (especially for governmental documents such as decrees).⁸ More epigraphs on stone than bronze survive from antiquity because, as a precious metal, bronze tablets were often melted down and reused for other purposes.⁹ In addition to these materials, surviving inscriptions are found on frescoes, mosaics, ceramics, lead tablets, amulets, and even human bones.¹⁰

The length of these engraved messages differs. Some epigraphs are short such as a group of 229 fifth century BC ostraca (or pottery fragments) discovered in a well near the Athenian acropolis, which nominate the famous Athenian general and statesman Themistocles for ostracism from the city: “Themistocles, son of Neocleus” (Θεμισθοκλῆς Νεοκλέος); “Themistocles from Phreari” (Θεμιστοκλῆς Φρεάριος; see Figures 1, 2).¹¹

⁶ The use of *inscribo* and *inscriptio* among Latin speakers in antiquity was diverse: Cicero, *On His House* 20; Pliny, *Nat. His.* 29.5.11. The word *titulus* was also used for an inscription, but often to distinguish it from the monument on which it was placed or to mean a placard, tablet, or label of some kind, as the Latin translation of John 19:19 attests. For more on these Latin terms, see G. M. Lee et al., *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 921, 1944–45.

⁷ Unlike the modern meaning of “epigraph,” use of ἐπιγραφή among ancient Greek speakers varied considerably: Josephus, *Ant.* 15.272; Lucian, *How to Write History*, 30. Ancient Greek speakers also used the term ἐπίγραμμα for an inscription. For more information on these terms, see LSJ 628.

⁸ For examples, see the famous Rosetta Stone (OGIS 90), which contains a decree of Ptolemy V (204–181 BC), and the Roman senate’s decree suppressing cultic devotion of Bacchus (*CIL* 1² 581).

⁹ See, for example, the below discussion of the Pantheon in Rome where the letters of the inscription on the building were originally filled with bronze, which is no longer extant (*CIL* 6.896 = *ILS* 129).

¹⁰ For examples of epigraphs on some of these materials, see this essay. For a collection of inscriptions on lead tablets, which were often used for cursing someone, see John G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹¹ For 190 of these ostraca with pictures, see Oscar Broneer, “Excavations on the North Slope of the Acropolis, 1937,” *Hesperia* 7 (1938): 228–43. For more up-to-date information on the ostraca, see Stefan Brenne, “Teil II: Die Ostraka (487 – ca. 416 v. Chr.) als Testimonien (T 1),” in *Ostrakismos-Testimonien I: Die Zeugnisse antiker Autoren der Inschriften und Ostraka über das*

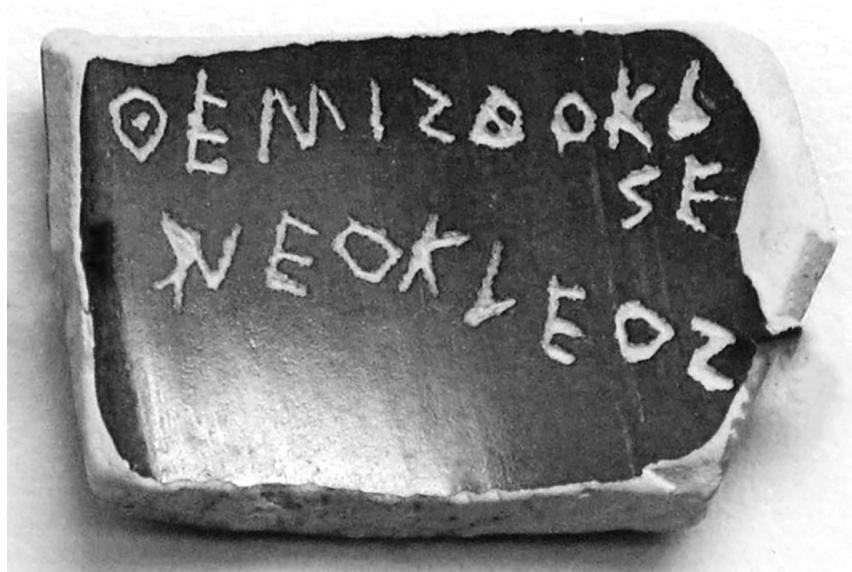


Figure 1: Ostraca with the name of Themistocles from the Ancient Agora Museum in Athens, Greece, photo by Marsyas, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Other inscriptions are long such as an epigraph incised on the eastern wall of the south entrance of Ephesus's theater in AD 103/4. This epigraph honors a Roman citizen in the city named Gaius Vibius Salutaris. The text of the inscription consists of 568 lines spread out in six columns that span 4.94 m.¹²

Finally, the quality of epigraphs varies. Professional craftsmen and stonecutters produced high quality inscriptions on various media with care and expenditure, often, but not always, for imperial and local governments such as the famous Latin epigraph that adorns the Pantheon in Rome. The text was incised into the temple's architrave with letters of a uniform size of about 70 cm in height, and, originally, these cavities were filled with bronze: "Marcus Agrippa, son of Lucius, thrice consul built (this temple)" (*M·Agrippa·L(uci)·f(ilius)·co(n)s(ul)·tertium·fecit*).¹³

On the other hand, more amateurish craftsmen and stonecutters and even non-professionals created inscriptions, which were ill-conceived, not carved

athenische Scherbengericht aus vorhellenistischer Zeit (487–322 v. Chr.), ed. Peter Siewert, Historia 155 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2002), 69–70.

¹² GIBM 3.481 = IEph 27. For more information on the inscription, see Guy M. Rogers, *The Sacred Identity of Ephesus: Foundation Myths of a Roman City* (London: Routledge, 1991).

¹³ CIL 6.896 = ILS 129. For more on the inscription, see Mary Boatwright, "Hadrian and the Agrippa Inscription of the Pantheon," in *Hadrian: Art, Politics and Economy*, ed. Thorsten Opper (London: British Museum, 2013), 19–30.

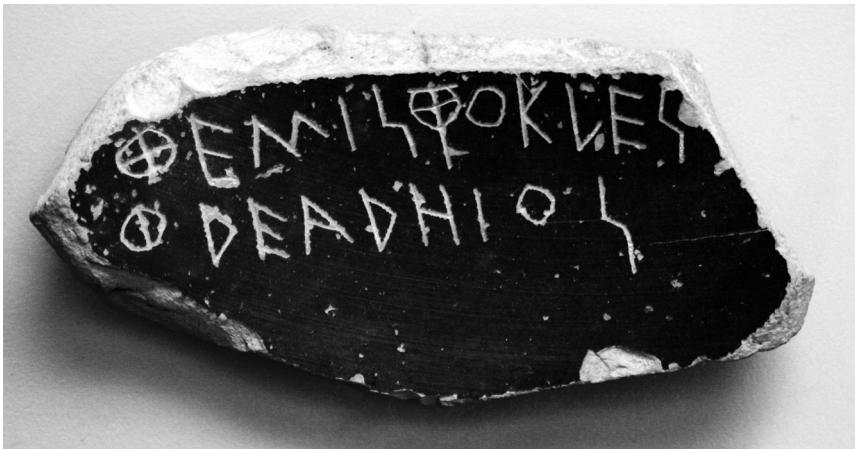


Figure 2: Another ostraca containing the name of Themistocles, the hand of which differs from Figure 1, photo by G.dallorto, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY.

in straight lines, and even contain what appear to be grammatical errors. For example, at least fourteen different individuals produced the ostraca bearing Themistocles's name and these epigraphs evince two different spelling of it, Θεμισθοκλῆς and Θεμιστοκλῆς (see Figures 1, 2).¹⁴

Many inscriptions were conceived as semi-permanent messages for future generations to read. This purpose is evident in an epigraph that Antiochus the Great (69–36 BC), king of the Roman client kingdom Commagene, had carved on the backs of a massive statue group that sits atop a mountain in the territory of his ancient realm (see Figure 3). In the inscription, the monarch notes that "he has recorded his beneficent works on consecrated bases with inviolable letters for all time" (ἐπὶ καθωσιωμένων βάσεων ἀσύλοις γράμμασιν ἔργα χάριτος ἴδιας εἰς χρόνον ἀνέγραψεν αἰώνιον; see Figure 4).¹⁵

Given that his words have remained two thousand years after their engraving, Antiochus's desire for the epigraph has heretofore been achieved. The making of a semi-permanent written record is not the only reason that inscriptions were produced, however. Ancient Greeks and Romans wrote messages on domestic instruments such as pottery for more decoration or function than to last "for all time." Nevertheless, because pottery, once fired, is virtually indestructible, these inscriptions have survived. Three of the most famous epigraphs on ceramics, which make up the oldest examples of the written Greek and Latin languages,

¹⁴ Broneer ("Excavations," 231) observes, "The inscriptions are as a rule carefully incised and very legible, but variations in spelling as well as obvious mistakes occur frequently."

¹⁵ OGIS 383:7–10.



Figure 3: Statue group on Mount Nemrut's eastern terrace. From left to right, Antiochus, Tyche-Commagene, Zeus-Oromasdus, Apollo-Mithradates-Helius-Hermes, and Artagnes-Hercules-Ares, photo by Klearchos Kapoutsis, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0.

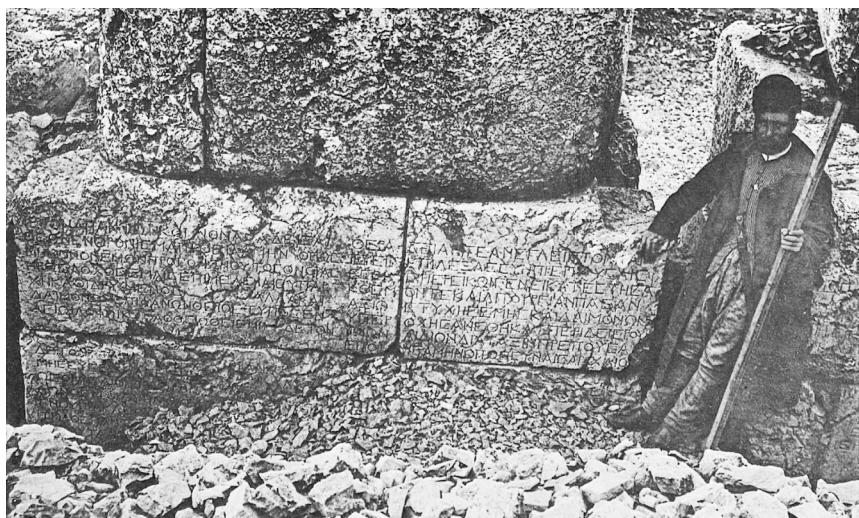


Figure 4: Picture of Greek inscription on the back of the statues from Mount Nemrut's eastern terrace, © Karl Humann and Otto Puchstein, *Reisen in Kleinasiien und Nordsyrien: ausgeführt im Auftrage der Königlichen Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften Atlas* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1890), Table 28, no. 2.



Figure 5: Picture of Nestor's cup from the Archaeological Museum of Pithecusae, photo by Marcus Cyron, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

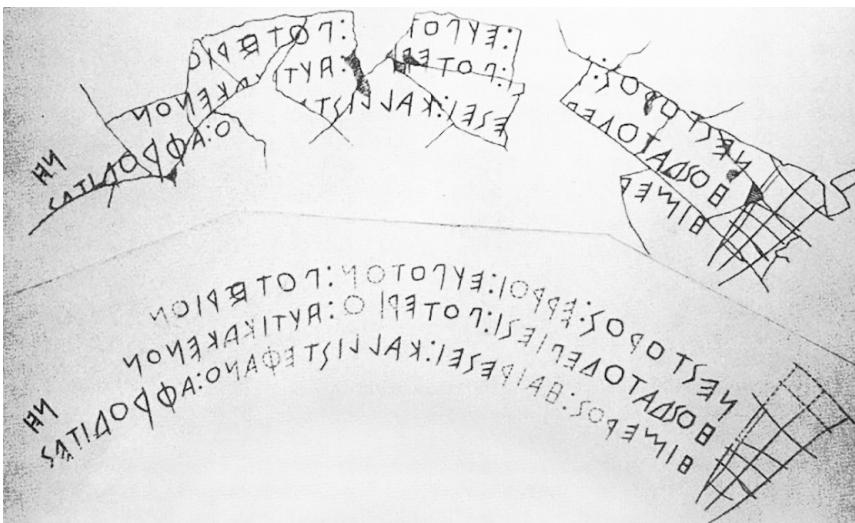


Figure 6: Picture of the inscription on Nestor's cup, which is written retrograde, via Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

are two eighth century BC drinking cups that bear the names of their respective owners in Greek, Nestor (*Νέστορος*) (see Figures 5, 6) and Philon (*Φίλιονος*),

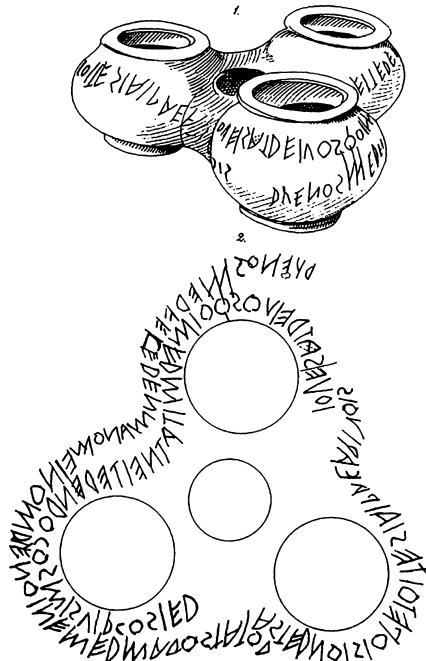


Figure 7: Drawing of the three connected vases on which the Duenos Inscription is inscribed as well as a transcription from the Latin text, which is written retrograde, © Henri Jordan, “Altlateinische Inschrift aus Rom,” *Hermes* 16 (1881): 225–260, public domain.

and the seventh-to-fifth century BC Duenos Inscription, which is an early Latin text that has proved difficult to decipher (see Figure 7).¹⁶

In addition to domestic pottery, ancient Greeks and Romans composed graffiti, which were ubiquitous and numerous, inside and outside their homes on walls that craftsmen later replastered, recovered, and repainted. In fact, one first century AD graffitist from Pompeii wryly comments about the number of graffiti on the wall of a basilica in the city, “Since you support the tedious works of so many writers, I am astonished that you, wall, have not fallen down” (*admiror te, paries, non cecidisse qui tot scriptorum taedia sustineas*).¹⁷ Because of the afore-

¹⁶ Nestor’s Cup, which is written retrograde: “I am Nestor’s cup, whence it is good to drink. Whoever drinks from this cup, desire for beautifully-crowned Aphrodite will seize him forthwith” (Νέστορος : ε[. . .]ι : εὐπότον : ποτέριον: ἡός δ’ ἀ<ν> τοδε π[ε]ιστοι : ποτερίο : αὐτίκα, κένον ήμερος : ήμερος : καλλιστεφάνος: Άφροδίτες; *SEG* 14:604). Philon’s Cup, which is written retrograde: “I am Philon’s” (Φιλίονος ἐμί; Μεθώνη Πιερίας I, no. 1). For the Duenos Inscription, whose translation and interpretation is debated, see *CIL* 1² 2.1.4 = *ILS* 8743. For another early Greek inscription on pottery, see the Dipylon Inscription (*CEG* 432).

¹⁷ *CIL* 4.2487. For more on this graffiti and its location in Basilica VIII.I.I, see <https://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffiti/AGP-EDR158840>.

mentioned renovation to walls and surfaces in Greek and Roman cities and homes, graffitiists knew that someone would eventually cover their texts.

Almost all inscriptions fall into two general types, public and private.¹⁸ Public epigraphs are inscriptions that civic, provincial, and imperial governments commissioned for public purposes using public monies. These texts are not equivalent to ancient governmental archives but were communiques most often from archives that governments chose to inscribe for future denizens to read most often on stone (marble or limestone) or bronze. Thus, public epigraphs tend to have a commemorative function. Such inscriptions are often made of the best available materials and are the products of skilled craftsmen and stonemasons. Epigraphers differ over the various subtypes of public inscriptions, but broadly speaking, most fall into the following three subtypes: official documents, which are epigraphs whose content relates to the governance of cities, provinces, and empires; honorific inscriptions, which laud beneficent individuals within Greek and Latin communities; and sacred inscriptions, which are epigraphs that civic, provincial, and imperial governments erected for their gods.¹⁹

On the other hand, private inscriptions were commissioned and set up by private individuals or associations for various purposes, which were not necessarily commemorative. Because individuals from all social classes and backgrounds composed these epigraphs, their content, the materials on which they appear, and the quality with which they were inscribed vary considerably (see above). As with public inscriptions, epigraphers disagree about the specific subtypes of these epigraphs. However, like public inscriptions, most private epigraphs fall into the same three main subtypes. Consequently, private individuals and associations set up inscriptions that contained official documents often relating to personal and associational finance as well as honorific and sacred inscriptions for the same purposes as civic, provincial, and imperial governments. In addition to these three subtypes, private epigraphs consist of epitaphs or grave inscriptions, which comprise almost two-thirds of all extant Greek and Latin epigraphy,²⁰ graffiti, messages on domestic instruments (such as Nestor's and Philon's cups and the Duenos Inscription), and curse tablets, which ancient Greeks and Romans had incised on lead tablets and often buried or threw into a well.²¹

Understanding the difference between these two main epigraphic types is critical for this chapter because public inscriptions are official government documents containing propaganda and official stances of civic, provincial, and imperial governments on particular matters. Alternatively, private epigraphs express

¹⁸ Burnett, *Studying*, 20–22.

¹⁹ Burnett, *Studying*, 22–38.

²⁰ Bodel, “Epigraphy,” 30.

²¹ Burnett, *Studying*, 38–47.

non-official views of the denizens of the classical world, which provide windows into their thoughts and perspectives, which always occurs within particular local contexts (even if one can no longer reconstruct that local context). With this distinction in mind, it is what the imperial governments and the individuals living within them thought about imperialism to which this essay now turns.

2 Discerning Anti-imperial Sentiments in Inscriptions

As one explores the question of anti-imperial sentiments in epigraphy, one looks in vain for such direct expressions in surviving Greek and Latin inscriptions from the territory of the ancient classical world.²² To date, I know of only one such epigraph (discussed below) in existence.²³ To the contrary, most surviving Greek and Latin public and private inscriptions express pro-imperial and in particular pro-Roman sentiments. For example, a fourth century AD marble base from the forum of the Roman colony Lepcis Magna (also known as Leptis Magna) in North Africa contains two epigraphs on its front face: a Latin dedication to the *genius* of the colony by a certain woman named Crescentina (*genio coloniae Lepcis Magnae Crescentina f(ecit)*) and a Greek inscription above the Latin dedication that reads: “Lepcis the Great loves you, Rome” (Λέπτικις ἡ μεγάλη, φιλῆ σε Ρώμη; see Figure 8).²⁴

²² As the below discussion highlights, it is probable that Greek epigraphs containing anti-Roman sentiments once existed, especially during the third and second centuries BC when Rome began to exert its influence in the eastern Mediterranean and before she became the absolute hegemon of the region. In support, Livy records that in the late third to second century BC, once the Macedonian king Philip V no longer served Athens's best interests, the city voted to destroy all inscriptions mentioning the king as well as the images of him and his family, even going so far as to curse and pollute the locations in which they had stood. Moreover, the city proscribed all “sacred rites” (*sacra*) associated with Philip and had a specific day devoted to an annual cursing of the king, his children, his kingdom, his land, and his navy (Livy, *History of Rome* 31.33.1–9). See also the so-called Oracle of the Potter, which is a third century AD Greek text based on a third or second century BC Demotic original, which laments the capture of Egypt by the Ptolemies. See L. Koenen, “Die Prophezeiungen des ‘Töpfers,’” *ZPE* 2 (1968): 179–209; Stanley M. Burstein, *The Hellenistic Age from the Battle of Ipsos to the Death of Kleopatra VII*, Translated Documents of Greece & Rome 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 136–39, no. 106. Once Greek cities submitted to Rome or to any pro-Roman factions within them, however, it is probable that such decrees were repealed, and such epigraphs were destroyed.

²³ While Katherine McDonald and Nicholas Zair (“Linguistic Resistance to Rome: A Re-appraisal of the Epigraphic Evidence,” in *Articulating Resistance Under the Roman Empire*, eds. Daniel Jolowicz and Jaś Elsner [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023], 48) note, “Very few inscriptions survive which explicitly express anti-Roman sentiment, in either their content or their language,” they reference no such epigraph in their essay. The only evidence they discuss is the use the indigenous languages, which some historians have interpreted as “acts of resistance against Rome.” They provide a nuanced and thoughtful discussion of the topic, along with the difficulties of using such data for such a purpose. For this secondary work, I am indebted to T. Corey Brennan, Professor of Classics at Rutgers University-New Brunswick.

²⁴ IRT 282 = Ignazio Tantillo and Francesca Bigi, *Leptis Magna una città e le sue iscrizioni in*



Figure 8: Front view of the marble base from Lepcis Magna, which contains a Greek and Latin epigraph, photo by Ignazio Tantillo, from Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania, CC BY-NC-SA.

Even though the text does not explicitly state its public nature with the common Latin abbreviation *DD* (by decision of the *decuriones* or local senate), the location of the monument in the colony, in the forum, evinces that the colony's legislative body must have approved its erection, for the placement of items in public spaces in Roman cities required such approval.

A pro-imperial and in particular pro-Roman attitude is found in private epigraphy, too. About a hundred years before Crescentina's epigraph and directly across the Mediterranean Sea to the northwest from Lepcis Magna, a third century AD graffito in the courtyard of *insula* 4 of Terrace House 2 in Ephesus

epoca Tardoromana (Cassino: Università degli Studi di Cassino, 2010), no. 84. <https://irt-os.kdl.kcl.ac.uk/en/inscriptions/IRT0282.html>.

expresses the following wish: “Rome, ruler of all, may your power never come to an end” (Ρώμη πανβασίλια, τὸ σὸν κράτος οὔποτ’ ὀλῆται).²⁵ The graffiti presupposes Rome’s imperial might, “ruler of all” (παν = “all” and βασίλια = “rule, dominion”), and requests, presumably the gods, that it never ceases.²⁶ As Hans Taeuber observes in the inscription’s *editio princeps*, the epigraph probably expresses not only the pro-Roman sentiment of the aristocrats who lived in *insula* 4 but also the other inhabitants of Terrace House 2 who benefited greatly from Roman rule.²⁷ Returning to North Africa, two inscriptions from Ptolemais, Cyrenaica attest to private positive pro-imperial and pro-Roman sentiments. Archaeologists discovered these epigraphs on two columns that probably held imperial statuary, which were placed directly outside the entrances of two villas in the city. The inscriptions, which date to the second to third century AD, are identical and evidence that the columns were dedicated “to the Augustan gods” (θεοῖς Σεβαστοῖς).²⁸ According to Adam Lajtar who published one of the texts, the inhabitants of these homes probably erected the monuments “as a manifestation of their sentiments towards their rulers.”²⁹

Aside from direct pro-imperial and pro-Roman sentiments in Greek and Latin epigraphy, inscriptions contain such expressions that are indirect. Beginning in the early second century BC numerous Greek cities established divine honors for the divine personification of the city of Rome, Roma, which they memorialized in epigraphs.³⁰ For example, a second century BC Greek inscription from Miletus

²⁵ Hans Taeuber, “Graffiti,” in *Hanghaus 2 in Ephesos. Die Wohneinheit 4: Baubefund, Ausstattung, Funde Textband*, ed. Hilke Thür (Wien: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2005), 140, no. GR 73. This graffiti is from phase IV of *insula* 4 and is found in courtyard 21 on the west wall, north of the passage to Room 22.

²⁶ See an inscription from lower Egypt that a certain Catilius set up lauding Augustus as “lord of the sea, a Zeus, son of his father Zeus the Liberator, having power over limitless regions, master of Europe and Asia, and a star over Hellas” (Καίσαρι ποντομέδοντι καὶ ἀπείρων κρατέοντι Ζανὶ τῷ ἐκ Ζανὸς πατρὸς Ἐλευθερίῳ, δεσπόται Εὐρώπας τε καὶ Ἀσίδος, ἄστρῳ ἀπάσας Ἐλλάδος; *IGR* 1.1295). I am grateful to Joshua Hebert, Ph.D. Student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary for this reference.

²⁷ Taeuber (“Graffiti,” 140) concludes, “Ein deutlicher Beweis, wie sehr die provinziale Oberschicht (und vielleicht nicht nur diese) im 3. Jh. n. Chr. die Segnungen der pax Romana.” See also Hans Taeuber (“Einblicke in die Privatesphäre. Die Evidenz der Graffiti aus dem Hanghaus 2 in Ephesos,” in *Öffentlichkeit – Monument – Text: XIV Congressus Internationalis Epigraphiae Graecae et Latinae 27.–31 Augusti MMXII Akten*, eds. Werner Eck and Peter Funke [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014], 489) who observes of the above graffiti, “Das Lebensgefühl der kaiserzeitlichen Bewohner faßt am besten der folgende Hexameter zusammen.”

²⁸ Carl H. Kraeling, *Ptolemais: City of the Libyan Pentapolis*, The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications XC (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 209, no. 1; Adam Lajtar, “Greek Inscriptions Discovered during Archaeological Works of the Polish Mission,” in *Ptolemais in Cyrenaica. Studies in Memory of Tomasz Mikocki*, ed. Jerzy Zelazowski (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2012), 266–71, no. 10.

²⁹ Lajtar, “Greek Inscriptions,” 271.

³⁰ See Ronald Mellor (ΘΕΑ ΡΩΜΗ The Worship of the Goddess Roma in the Greek World, *Hypomnemata* 42 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975], esp. 207–28) who, while inter-

records a sacred law outlining the requirements of the election and the liturgy of the city's priest of the citizen-body (*δῆμος*) of the Romans and the goddess Roma. The text indicates that the priest was to be "a man no younger than twenty years old" (*ἄνδρα μὴ νεώτερον ἐτῶν εἴκοσι*) who served a term of three years, eight months.³¹ During the year, this priest, other civic officials, and the city's ephebes were to offer at least six different animal sacrifices (*ἱερεῖον τέλειον, ιερεῖον τέλειον βοϊκὸν, ιερῆ[ον τέλειον]ον υἱκὸν*) "to the citizen-body of the Romans and Roma" (*τῷ Δῆμῳ τῷ Ρωμαίων καὶ τῇ Ρώμῃ*).³² In addition to these victims, the priest was to oversee "athletic contests" (*ἀθλήματα*) "as remarkable as possible" (*ἐπιφανέστατοι*) called "the Roman games" (*τὰ Ρωμαῖα*) and to bestow certain "martial weapons" (*ὅπλα πολεμιστήρια*) upon the victors of these competitions. These weapons were to have the name of the games and other words engraved on them that "evince the highest eagerness ... in conformity with the citizen-body (of the Milesians) for the divine and our gratitude for the Romans" (*ποιούμενος τὴν ἐνδιξοτάτην ... σπουδὴν ἀκολούθως τῇ τοῦ δῆμο[υ πρὸ]ς τὸ θεῖον εὐσεβείᾳ καὶ τῇ πρὸς Ρω[μαίους εὐχαριστίᾳ]*).³³ Finally, the epigraph records that Miletus was in the process of building a "sanctuary of Roma" (*τὸ ιερὸν τῆς Ρώμης*) when the sacred law was passed. At the completion of this sacred space, the victors of the Roman games were to dedicate their military prizes "in the Romaion" (*ἐν τῷ Ρωμαίῳ*), which appears to be the sanctuary in question.³⁴ Until the temple was finished, though, winners were to erect their trophies in the gymnasium of the *neoi*.³⁵

Not only did Greek cities enact sacred laws associated with the divine imperial personification of Rome but also they set up dedications to the goddess heralding her as a source of their freedom and benefaction. A second-first century BC altar from Macedonia links Roma to the god of freedom, Zeus the Liberator, as the inscription on it notes that it has been dedicated to "Zeus the Liberator and Roma" (*Διὸς Ἐλευθερίῳ καὶ Ρώμῃ*).³⁶ At Delos, a second century BC "association" (*τὸ κοινὸν*) devoted to Berytian Poseidon set up a marble statue of the "benefactress goddess Roma" (*Ρώμην θεὰν εὐεργέτιν*), part of which survives, in the cella of their meeting place "because of her goodwill for the association and its native

interpreting divine honors for Roma in more of a political fashion, acknowledges that the goddess is a creation of the Greek world and highlights the contextuality of each grant of the honors in question for her.

³¹ LSAM 49.A 4–9.

³² LSAM 49.A 16–19, 22–29, B.22–33, 36–41.

³³ LSAM 49.B 4–16. For more on the Romaia in the Greek world, see Mellor, *ΘΕΑ ΡΩΜΗ*, 169–70.

³⁴ LSAM 49.B 19–22.

³⁵ LSAM 49.B 19–21.

³⁶ SEG 27.303. See also Charles Picard, "Inscriptions de Macédoine et de Thrace," *BCH* 37 (1913): 138, no. 42.

land,” Berytus (εύνοίας ἔνεκεν τῆς εἰς τὸ κοινὸν καὶ τὴν πατρίδα).³⁷ Similarly, the first century BC citizen-body of the city of Julis on the island of Ceos dedicated a marble object, probably a statue base, “to the Savior goddess Roma” (Θεᾶτι [‘Ρώ]μῃ Σωτέραι).³⁸ Finally, between 27 BC and AD 37, the citizen-body of Assos and the Roman *negotiatores* who lived and conducted business in the *polis* erected an image of “the goddess Roma, the benefactor of the cosmos” (ὁ δῆμος καὶ [οἱ] πραγματευόμενοι ὑπὸ[μαῖοι] θεὰ[ν] Ρώμῃ [τ]ὴν εὐεργέτιν τοῦ κόσμου) in the city’s gymnasium.³⁹

While Greek and Latin epigraphs express pro-imperial and pro-Roman sentiments, some texts contain a negative attitude toward particular Romans, which tended to occur for three reasons: the senate in Rome labeled a certain Roman a “public enemy” (*hostis*); the senate voted to erase an individual’s memory; or a successive emperor acted against the person and policies of his predecessor.⁴⁰ During the early Principate, the most infamous Roman to be named a *hostis* was the emperor Nero. The senate declared him as such in AD 68 and, as a result, he, with the help of one of his secretaries, committed suicide rather than face the impending punishment that accompanied the senate’s declaration.⁴¹ Because Rome was thrown into civil war after this event, the public actions against Nero were limited. For example, statues of him were not systematically destroyed, as tended to be the case with others Romans whom the senate declared a *hostis*.⁴² In fact, three of the four emperors from AD 69 – Galba, Otho, and Vitellius – tried to rehabilitate Nero in their quests to gain control of Rome and her empire.⁴³ Despite their attempts, Nero’s name was erased from some, not all, inscriptions in Rome and cities of the empire.⁴⁴ For example, his name was removed from a monument of the *Augustales* in the Roman colony of Puteoli, one of the major ports that served Rome, and from several public epigraphs that Athens set up, including a catalogue of the city’s ephebes and dedications to Nero, one of which hailed him as the new Apollo.⁴⁵ Despite these occurrences, Nero’s name remains

³⁷ ID 1778 = OGIS 591. For another epigraph honoring Roma as a benefactor, see OGIS 441.134–35. The city of Thessalonica had a priesthood of Roma and the Roman benefactors that lasted into the third century AD. For a discussion and the epigraphic evidence, see D. Clint Burnett, *Paul and Imperial Divine Honors: Christ, Caesar, and the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024), 116–17.

³⁸ IG 12.5.622.

³⁹ IAssos 20.

⁴⁰ For more on Rome and the actions that the senate and emperors took to destroy or control the memory of certain Romans, see Harriet I. Flower, *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁴¹ Suetonius, *Nero* 49. For more information, see Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 199–212.

⁴² Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 116–21.

⁴³ Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 200–1.

⁴⁴ For more on Nero’s name in inscriptions, see Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 212–23.

⁴⁵ CIL 10.1574 = ILS 226 (Puteoli); IG II² 1990 (Athens); 3278 (Athens). For these references, I am indebted to Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 337, no. 45; 338, no. 56.

in many inscriptions from the territory of the Roman Empire such as texts from Iconium and Pergamum, to name a few.⁴⁶

The most extreme action that the senate took against a Roman citizen was the full erasure of his or her memory from the public conscience, a practice that modern scholars call *damnatio memoriae*. One of the highest-ranking Romans to suffer this punishment was the emperor Domitian. After his assassination in AD 96, the senate met and passed legislation directed against the recently murdered emperor, which included the destruction of his statues and the elimination of epigraphs that mention him. As Suetonius records, the body politic decreed “that everywhere his inscriptions should be erased and all memory (of him) should be annihilated” (*eradendos ubique titulus abolendamque omnem memoriam decerneret*).⁴⁷ The senate’s decree was carried out thoroughly in Rome and, for the most part, in the territories of her empire. Harriet Flower observes that Domitian’s name “has virtually disappeared” from epigraphy in Rome as well as many inscriptions across the empire such as those on the monumental gateways of Hierapolis and Laodicea in the Lycus Valley.⁴⁸ As with Nero, the erasure of Domitian’s memory from the public conscience was not total and his name remains in some epigraphs such as the famous *Lex Iuritana* from the Roman city of Irni in modern-day Spain.⁴⁹

The final way that inscriptions contain negative sentiments about particular Romans is when a successive emperor took actions against his predecessor such as when Claudius succeeded Gaius Caligula. The latter’s demeanor and treatment of senators and some Praetorian guards led to his assassination in AD 41.⁵⁰ Because of Claudius’s attempt to bolster support his reign in particular and the veiled monarchy that was the Principate in general, the new emperor disallowed formal action against his predecessor.⁵¹ However, he invalidated Caligula’s legal acts and had statues of the disgraced emperor removed from Rome during the night.⁵² It is unclear if Claudius instituted the erasure of Caligula’s name from epigraphs, for our two main literary historical records of this period, Suetonius and Cassius Dio, are silent on this point and the removal of Caligula’s name,

⁴⁶ ILS 8848 (Iconium); IGR 4.330 (Pergamum). For these references, I am indebted to Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 337, no. 45.

⁴⁷ Suetonius, *Domitian* 23.1. For more information, see Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 235–40.

⁴⁸ Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 240–41. For the gateways from Hierapolis and Laodicea respectively, see Tullia Ratti, *An Epigraphic Guide To Hierapolis*, trans. Paul Arthur (Istanbul: Italian Archaeological Mission at Hierapolis, 2006), 72–77, no. 10; IGR IV 847 = *ILaodikeia* 24.

⁴⁹ Julian González and Michael H. Crawford, “The Lex Iuritana: A New Copy of the Flavian Municipal Law,” *JRS* 76 (1986): 147–223. For this reference, I am indebted to Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 246–47.

⁵⁰ See Suetonius, *Gaius*, esp. 58.

⁵¹ Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 60.4.5.

⁵² Suetonius, *Divus Claudius* 11.3; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 60.4.1, 5; 60.5.1. Some statues of Caligula were thrown into the Tiber River, others were put in storage, while others were re-carved to depict Claudius or Augustus. See Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 150–52.

mostly his *praenomen*, from epigraphy is random.⁵³ In Pompeii, for example, two almost identical inscriptions honoring three “attendants” (*ministri*) of Caligula evince different treatment of his name: its erasure in one but not the other.⁵⁴ Similarly, the Greek city of Cyzicus allowed Caligula’s name to remain in a twenty-five-line epigraph mentioning him four times and even calling him “the new Sun” (ὁ νέος “Ηλίος”) and a “god” (θεός).⁵⁵ However, in a decree engraved on stone in the same city that honors a certain Antonia Tryphaena, the emperor’s name has been removed.⁵⁶

Perhaps one of the best places to find anti-imperial and anti-Roman sentiments in epigraphy would be from the inscriptions that Rome’s enemies set up. Unfortunately, either not many such epigraphs survive or the enemies in question did not have an advanced epigraphic culture or habit, leaving such sentiments unrecorded. The only inscription known to me that expresses an anti-Roman attitude from the confines of the Roman Empire is a Greek epigraph that was part of a statue base from the city of Nysa that honors a certain citizen of the city, Chaeremon, for his role in the First Mithridatic War (89–85 BC).⁵⁷ The text consists of a heading evincing that what follows has the approval of Nysa’s citizen-body and council. Three letters about Chaeremon make up the bulk of the inscription, one from the Roman consul Gaius Cassius to the Nysaeans and two from Mithridates VI to his satrap Leonippus.⁵⁸ In the first epistle, Gaius Cassius relates how Chaeremon came to him at Apamea and gave him sixty thousand *modii* of wheat for his hungry army.⁵⁹ Mithridates discovered Chaeremon’s act and composed the last two missives, issuing a bounty for Chaeremon and his sons, dead or alive, in the former, and his arrest, in the latter.⁶⁰ In the second letter, Mithridates calls the Romans “our most hateful enemies” (τοῖς ἐκχθίστοις πολεμίους) and notes that Chaeremon’s collusion with them proves that he has “from the beginning been most hatefully and hostilely disposed to our interests” (ἐκχθρότατα καὶ πολεμιώτατα πρὸς τὰ ήμέτερα πράγματα διακείμενος ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς).⁶¹ In the third missive, the king informs Leonipius that Chaeremon facilitated his sons’ escape to Rhodes, that he has taken refuge in the temple of

⁵³ Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 154–59.

⁵⁴ CIL 10.901, 902. For this reference, I am indebted to Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 154.

⁵⁵ IGR IV.145 = SIG³ 798.

⁵⁶ SIG³ 799. For this reference, I am indebted to Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 156. It seems possible that Tryphaena may have requested the erasure of Caligula’s name from the inscription honoring her.

⁵⁷ For more information on the Mithridatic Wars, see B. C. McGing, *The Foreign Policy of Mithridates VI Eupator King of Pontus*, *Mnemosyne* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

⁵⁸ For the inscription see SIG³ 741 I + SIG³ 741 II = RDGE no. 48 + SIG³ 741 III = Welles, RC 73 + SIG³ 741 IV = Welles, RC 74. For this reference, I am indebted to Claude Eilers, Associate Professor of Classics at McMaster University.

⁵⁹ SIG³ 741 II = RDGE no. 48.

⁶⁰ SIG³ 741 III = Welles, RC 73 + SIG³ 741 IV = Welles, RC 74.

⁶¹ SIG³ 741 III = Welles, RC 73.

Artemis at Ephesus, and that Chaeremon is sending letters, presumably containing information about Mithridates and his forces, to the Romans who are “the common enemies (of humanity)” (τοὺς κοινοὺς πολεμίους).⁶² While this epigraph contains anti-Roman sentiments, it does not stem from a worldview that is anti-imperial, for at the time of Mithridates’ composition of his two letters, the king was in the process of waging an imperial war of conquest that included the annexation of the territories of Paphlagonia, Bithynia, and Cappadocia, the conquering of much of Asia Minor and Greece, and the slaughter of a number of Romans.⁶³

The largest inscription to express anti-Roman sentiments comes from the territory of modern-day Iran.⁶⁴ The epigraph was erected by the second emperor of the Sasanian empire (the empire that conquered and succeeded the Parthian empire), Shapur I (AD 240–271), and discovered in June 1936 and June 1939 at Naqse-e Rustam, near Persepolis. It, along with some reliefs depicting the emperor, has been carved into grey limestone blocks of a structure in three different languages: Middle Persian (the language of the Sasanians) on the east side of the building, Parthian (the language of the former dynasty) on the west side, and Greek on the structure’s south side.⁶⁵ That Shapur had part of the inscription composed in Greek is, in the words of Zeev Rubin, “surprising” because that language is not used in other Sasanian epigraphy.⁶⁶ The reason for the adoption of Greek appears to have been that the emperor wished “to universalise” his anti-

⁶² SIG³ 741 IV = Welles, *RC* 74.

⁶³ See B. C. McGing, “Mithradates,” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed., eds. Simon Hornblower, Anthony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 963–64.

⁶⁴ For more on the Parthian Empire, see Richard N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran* (Munich: Beck, 1984). For an account of the Parthian Empire focused on its relations with Rome, see Adrian Goldsworthy, *Rome and Persia: The Seven Hundred Year Rivalry* (New York: Basic Books, 2023).

⁶⁵ The Middle Persian text is thirty-five lines, but severely damaged, the Parthian text is thirty lines, and the Greek text is seventy lines. For the inscription, see Philip Huyse, *Die Dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. An Der Kaba-I Zardušt (ŠKZ)*, Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum Part III, 2 vols. (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1999) 1:22–64. From hereafter I abbreviate the inscription as ŠKZ. For older studies of the epigraph, see Michael Back, *Die sassanidischen Staatsinschriften: Studien zur Orthographie und Phonologie des Mittelpersischen der Inschriften zusammen mit einem etymologischen Index des mittelpersischen Wortgutes und einem Textcorpus der behandelten Inschriften* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 280–498; André Maricq, “Classica et Orientalia: 5. Res Gestae Divi Saporis,” *Syria* 35 (1958): 295–360.

⁶⁶ Zeev Rubin, “Res Gestae Divi Saporis: Greek and Middle Iranian in a Document of Sasanian Anti-Roman Propaganda,” in *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language Contact and the Written Text*, eds. James N. Adams, Marke Janse, and Simon C. R. Swain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 270–71. Philip Huyse (“The Use of Greek Language and Script in Bilingual and Trilingual Inscriptions from the Iranian World,” in *Öffentlichkeit – Monument – Text: XIV Congressus Internationalis Epigraphiae Graecae et Latinae 27.–31. Augusti MMXII Akten*, eds. Werner Eck and Peter Funke [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014], 176–77) also makes this observation.

Roman sentiments, for, as Philip Huyse observes, Greek was still “the *lingua franca* of that part of the world” in the third century AD.⁶⁷

The epigraph begins by identifying the emperor and the lands over which he governed.⁶⁸ Then, Shapur relates that upon his enthronement Gordian Caesar invaded Sasanian territory with an army from “all the empire of the Romans” (ἀπὸ πάσης τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς).⁶⁹ The emperor met the invaders in “a great battle” (πόλεμος μέγας), in which Gordian was killed and Rome’s army was routed (ἀναλίσκω).⁷⁰ At that time, “the Romans proclaimed Philip as Caesar” (οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι Φίλιππον Καίσαρα ἀνηγόρευσαν) and he came to Shapur “imploring” (εἰς παράκλησιν) him for peace.⁷¹ The newly crowned Roman emperor paid the Sasanian monarch five hundred thousand *denarii* as “tribute” (φόρους) ransoming the lives of himself and his army (τῶν ψ[υ]χῶν α[ὐτ]ῶν ἀντίτειμα).⁷² Once Philip and his army were safe, he “lied” (ἐψεύσατο) to Shapur, apparently reneging on some agreement made when Philip paid Shapur tribute, and the former “committed an injustice” (ἀδικίαν ἐποίησεν) by invading Armenia.⁷³ At this point, the Sasanian emperor advanced, attacked a sixty-thousand strong Roman army, and “routed” (ἀναλίσκω) them at Barbalissus, a fortress on the Euphrates River in northern Syria.⁷⁴ In retaliation, Shapur claims that he laid waste to much of Syria, burning, looting, and pillaging as well as “capturing” (κρατέω) a total thirty-seven cities “from the people of the Romans” (ἀπὸ τοῦ ἔθνους Ῥωμαίων).⁷⁵ Later, the Sasanian king besieged Carrhae and Edessa, at which point Valerian Caesar marshalled an army of seventy-thousand to repel him.⁷⁶ There was another “great battle” (μέγας πόλεμος) at which Shapur defeated Valerian and his army and then the former claims that his forces burned, looted, and pillaged more of Rome’s territory, “capturing” (κρατέω) thirty-six cities “from the people of the Romans” (ἀπὸ τοῦ ἔθνους Ῥωμαίων).⁷⁷ Most importantly, at this battle Shapur took Valerian, as well as other notable Romans, prisoner and deported them to Persia: “we captured Valerian Caesar with our own hands … and we led them into Persia” (Οὐαλεριανὸν Καίσαρα ἡμεῖς ἐν ιδίαις χερσὶν ἐκρατήσαμεν … καὶ εἰς Περσίδα αὐτοὺς ἐξηγάγομεν).⁷⁸ The Sasanian emperor had this event memorialized in a relief from the structure at

⁶⁷ Huyse, “Use of Greek,” 175–76.

⁶⁸ ŠKZ 1–5.

⁶⁹ ŠKZ 6.

⁷⁰ ŠKZ 7–8.

⁷¹ ŠKZ 8.

⁷² ŠKZ 8.

⁷³ ŠKZ 9.

⁷⁴ ŠKZ 9.

⁷⁵ ŠKZ 10–17.

⁷⁶ ŠKZ 18–21.

⁷⁷ ŠKZ 22–29.

⁷⁸ ŠKZ 21.



Figure 9: Relief from Naqse-e Rustam, depicting Valerian bowing before a mounted Shapur I, photo by Diego Delso, [delso.photo](#), via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Naqse-e Rustam containing the inscription in question, which depicts Valerian bowing before Shapur and pleading for mercy (see Figure 9).

Towards the end of the epigraph, the Sasanian king considers his achievements and boasts that he has “sought after many other peoples” (καὶ ἡμεῖς ἔτερα πολλὰ ἔθνη ἐζητήσαμεν) and, in the process, “earned a great reputation for courage” (καὶ πολὺ ὄνομα καὶ ἀνδρεύότητα ἐπεποιήσαμεν).⁷⁹ Because of this, the emperor’s gods have made Shapur their vice-regent and even helped him in his imperial designs: “Therefore, (it is) for this reason that the gods have so made us their vassals, and with the help of the gods we sought for and conquered these large peoples” (κατ’ ἐκεῖνο οὖν ὅτι οἱ θεοὶ ἡμᾶς οὔτως δαστικέρτας⁸⁰ ἔκτισαν καὶ τὴν βοήθιαν τῶν θεῶν ταῦτα τὰ τοσαῦτα ἔθνη ἐζητήσαμεν καὶ κατέχομεν).⁸¹ To show his appreciation to the divine for their support, the Sasanian emperor notes that “among every people group, we have consecrated many Bahram fires and provided good things to many magi” (ἡμεῖς δὲ κατὰ ἔθνος καὶ ἔθνος

⁷⁹ ŠKZ 31.

⁸⁰ Antonio Panaino (“Between Semantics and Pragmatics: Origins and Developments in the Meaning of *dastgerd*,” *Sasanian Studies: Late Antique Iranian World* 1 [2022]: 234) argues that the Middle Persian and Parthian term behind this Greek transliteration carries the meaning of “the act of putting somebody/something in the hands of a superior authority (the king, but presumably also a god) signified a relation of submission and dependence.”

⁸¹ ŠKZ 32.

πολλὰ πυρεῖα Γουαραθραν ἰδρύσαμεν καὶ πολλοῖς ἀνθρώποις μάγοις τὰ ἀγαθὰ ἐποίησαμεν).⁸² In the end, Shapur exhorts his successors to emulate him and, in consequence, the gods will similarly reward them: “Now as we have been zealous for the needs and cultic acts of the gods, we have become the creation of the gods, we have sought for and conquered all these peoples with the help of the gods, and we have earned a reputation for courage, now (if) that person who will be after us will be (this) fortunate, let that person be zealous for the needs and cultic acts of the gods so that the gods will be his helpers and they [the rulers] will become their vassals” (νῦν ὡσπερ ἡμεῖς ἐπὶ τὰς χρείας καὶ θρησκείας τῶν θεῶν σποθδάζομεν καὶ τῶν θεῶν κτίσμα ἐσμὲν καὶ εἰς βοήθιαν τῶν θεῶν ταῦτα πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ἐζητήσαμεν καὶ κατέσχαμεν καὶ ὄνομα καὶ ἀνδρείαν ἐπεποιησάμεθα, κάκεῖνος δέ, ὅστις μεθ’ ἡμᾶς ἔσται καὶ εὐτυχὴς ἔσται, κάκεῖνος ἐπὶ τὰς χρείας καὶ θρησκείας τῶν θεῶν σπουδασάτω, ἵνα οἱ θεοὶ βοηθοὶ αὐτῷ ἔσονται καὶ δαστικίρτην ἐαυτῶν ποιήσωνται).⁸³

Rome and her empire play a prominent role in Shapur’s inscription, taking up twenty-nine of the seventy lines of the Greek version.⁸⁴ Moreover, the Sasanian king’s three victories over Rome were one of two motivating factors for him having the epigraph set up. This much is clear in that after introducing himself, relating the peoples and territories of his empire, and narrating his three conquests over Rome, Shapur says, “we have sought out many other peoples and have made a great reputation for courage, which we have not engraved here (on this monument), except for the aforementioned events. For this reason, we have ordered (these things) to be written so that whoever comes after us will know this, our reputation, courage, power” (καὶ ἡμεῖς ἔτερα πολλὰ ἔθνη ἐζητήσαμεν καὶ πολὺ ὄνομα καὶ ἀνδρειότητα ἐπεποιήσαμεν, ἡ ἐνθάδε οὐκ ἐνεγράψαμεν. πλὴν τὰ τοσαῦτα. διὰ τοῦτο ἐκελεύσαμεν γραφῆναι, ἵνα ὅστις μεθ’ ἡμᾶς ἔσται τοῦτο τὸ ὄνομα καὶ τὴν ἀνδρείαν καὶ τὴν δεσποτείαν τὴν ἡμετέραν ἐπιγνώσεται).⁸⁵

As with the above inscription containing Mithridates’s letters, Shapur’s epigraph is anti-Roman, but it is not anti-imperial because the Sasanian emperor boasts of his empire and that he was the first ruler to extend her borders beyond non-Iranian peoples: “I, the devotee of Mazda, the god Shapur, king of kings of the Iranians and *non-Iranians* ... son of the devotee of Mazda, the god Artaxarus, king of kings of the Iranians” (ἐγὼ μασδαασνης θεὸς Σαπώρης, βασιλεὺς βασιλέων Ἀριανῶν καὶ Ἀναριανῶν ... νίὸς μασδαασνου θεοῦ

⁸² ŠKZ 32.

⁸³ ŠKZ 51.

⁸⁴ Zeev Rubin, “The Roman Empire in the *Res Gestae Divi Saporis* – the Mediterranean World in Sāsānian Propaganda,” in *Ancient Iran and the Mediterranean World: Proceedings of an International Conference in Honour of Professor Józef Wolski, Held at the Jagiellonian University, Cracow, in September 1996*, ed. Edward Dabrowa (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 1998), 178.

⁸⁵ ŠKZ 31.

Ἄρταξάρου βασιλεὺς βασιλέων Ἀριανῶν).⁸⁶ Immediately after this introduction, Shapur lists over twenty-five people groups and lands over which he was “lord” ([κύριος]), that he “conquered” (κατ[έ]χω …]), and that he had “made tributaries and enslaved” (ἡμεῖν [εἰς φόρους καὶ] δουλείαν ἐστήσαμεν).⁸⁷ Consequently, he describes his empire as “the kingdom of peoples” (τὴν βασιλίαν τῶν ἔθνων),⁸⁸ which seems to be contrast with his view of Rome as only “the empire” or “the people of the Romans” (τῆς Ρωμαίων ἀρχῆς; ἔθνος τῶν Ρωμαίων).⁸⁹ Finally, Shapur’s inscription highlights one important factor to ancient imperialism: he traces his martial conquests to the will and aid of his gods. Therefore, one might accurately describe Shapur I’s conquests, as well as most wars of antiquity, as a holy war, for the emperor notes that “with the help of the gods we sought for and conquered these large peoples” (τὴν βοήθιαν τῶν θεῶν ταῦτα τὰ τοσαῦτα ἔθνη ἐζητήσαμεν καὶ κατέχομεν).⁹⁰

3 Inscriptions and Anti-imperial Sentiments in the New Testament

The above discussion highlights that while epigraphy contains negative expressions against particular empires and/or their leaders, almost all surviving public and private Greek and Latin inscriptions indirectly or directly express pro-imperialistic sentiments, whether Roman, Mithridatic, or Parthian/Sasanian. This overwhelmingly positive view of imperialism stems from the fact that the notion of wars of conquest as negative is a largely modern phenomenon.⁹¹ While there were some occasional ancient voices to the contrary, most people in the classical world took war and imperialistic wars of conquest as an inevitable part of life. The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, who lived when the Persian Empire held sway over his city, Ephesus, remarked that “war is the father of all things, the king of all things” (πόλεμος πάντων μὲν πατήρ ἐστι, πάντων δὲ βασιλεύς), and the “common” (ξυνόν) experience of humanity.⁹² The Athenian general turned historian Thucydides has the Athenians, as they are about to conquer the Greek city of Melos during the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC),

⁸⁶ ŠKZ §1.

⁸⁷ ŠKZ §1–2, 5.

⁸⁸ ŠKZ § 6.

⁸⁹ ŠKZ § 6, 9, 24, 30.

⁹⁰ ŠKZ 32.

⁹¹ For more on war in the ancient Near East, see Charlie Trimm, *Fighting for the King and the Gods: A Survey of Warfare in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017). For more on war in the classical world, see Brian Campbell and Lawrence A. Trittle, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁹² Heraclitus, *On the Universe* 44, 62.

confess that their aggressive martial campaign against the *polis* is a law of nature: “wherever the divine and humanity have power, by the necessity of nature, they always reign. Neither have we set up this law nor, it being set down, are we the first ones to use it. Rather, having received it as it exists and leaving it to exist for posterity, we make use of it, knowing that you and others, having the same power as we, would do the same thing” (τό τε θεῖον … τὸ ἀνθρώπειόν τε σαφῶς διὰ παντὸς ὑπὸ φύσεως ἀναγκαίας, οὐ ἀν κρατῆ, ὅρχειν. καὶ ἡμεῖς οὔτε θέντες τὸν νόμον οὔτε κειμένω πρῶτοι χρησάμενοι, ὅντα δὲ παραλαβόντες καὶ ἐσόμενον ἐς αἱεὶ καταλείψοντες χρώμεθα αὐτῷ, ειδότες καὶ ὑμᾶς ἄν καὶ ἄλλους ἐν τῇ αὐτῇ δυνάμει ἡμῖν γενομένους δρῶντας ἀν ταύτο).⁹³ In general, the Romans held to a similar understanding of warfare and imperial conquest as Heraclitus and Thucydides. Cicero notes that “most” (*plerique*) Romans in the first century BC “believe that military affairs are more important than urbane ones” (*arbitrentur res bellicas maiores esse quam urbanas*).⁹⁴ Lest one think that the orator disavowed war, elsewhere he records that “nature” (*natura*) grants “dominion” (*dominatum*) “to everything that is best” (*optimo cuique*), which echoes the above remarks of the Athenians.⁹⁵ Similar to Shapur I’s understanding of his gods aiding him and allowing him to make imperial conquests, Virgil connects Rome’s successful imperialism to Jupiter’s divine decree that the Romans become “lords of things” (*rerum dominos*) and have “empire without end” (*imperium sine fine*).⁹⁶ Therefore, their arts or skills are, according to Virgil’s Anchises, “to impose the custom of peace, to spare the vanquished, and to subdue the proud” (*tu regere imperio populous, Romane, memento (hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem, parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*).⁹⁷ For this reason, Adrian Goldsworthy is certainly correct that Rome was not the only imperialist power in the classical world. She was, however, one of the most effective ancient city-states at waging wars of conquest.⁹⁸

Given the general pro-imperial and the particular pro-Roman sentiments of most of the inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world in epigraphy, one productive line of inquiry in using inscriptions in the study of the New Testament would be in exploring how early Christian texts run counter to these epigraphic sentiments

⁹³ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 5.105.

⁹⁴ The famous orator and statesman, however, disagreed with this “opinion” (*opinio*). See Cicero, *On Duties* 1.22 (74).

⁹⁵ Cicero, *On the Republic* 3.35.

⁹⁶ Virgil, *Aen.* 1.279–83. See also 1.287. Note Aeneas’s comment at Troy’s fall that, “Abandoning their cellas and altars, all the gods on which this empire stood, have departed” (*excessere omnes adytis arisque relictae di, quibus imperium hoc steterat*; *Aen.* 1.351–52).

⁹⁷ Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.851–53.

⁹⁸ For more on Roman warfare, see Adrian Goldsworthy, *Pax Romana: War, Peace and Conquest in the Roman World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Goldsworthy, *Roman Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

and/or redefine them.⁹⁹ On the one hand, some of the most anti-imperial, not just anti-Roman, expressions in the New Testament are found in Matthew's Gospel and in the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁰⁰ The Beatitudes promise a reversal of fortune at the eschaton for those with the least amount of political power in first century AD Palestine through the work of God (Matt 5:3, 5, 8, 10).¹⁰¹ In particular, the first part of the Sermon foretells a reward for those who are merciful (ἐλεήμων) to others and who help bring God's *shalom* (εἰρηνοποιός) to earth (Matt 5:7, 9). The Evangelist goes on to define this former virtue as extending table fellowship, not pacification through the sword, to outsiders in first century AD Jewish Palestinian culture such as tax collectors and sinners (Matt 9:10–13). Interestingly, despite their "peacemaking" (εἰρηνοποιός), the disciples' radical obedience to God and his Messiah results in violence perpetrated upon them by members of their own families, presumably from family members denouncing Christians to authorities (Matt 10:34–36). Later in the homily, Jesus commands his disciples not to seek vengeance, but to turn the other cheek, to give up their personal belongings willingly, and to acquiesce to the demands of others (Matt 5:38–42). Such sentiments run counter to the spirit of imperialism, especially to the idea of a "just war," that pervaded most of the ancient world including but not limited to Rome and her empire.¹⁰² Finally, in Matthew's Passion account, Jesus demonstrates how to turn the other cheek, to give into the demands of others, and not to resist the evil one (Matt 5:39) by instructing Peter to return his sword to its scabbard because "all who choose the sword will be destroyed by the sword" (26:51–52) and then allowing himself to be arrested, tried, and executed.¹⁰³ While many post-Constantinian Christians have argued against a literal interpretation of Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount, Ulrich Luz is certainly correct that, according to Matthew, the demands of God's kingdom amount to the "renunciation of force" that functions as a "sign of contrast ... [and] new way of righteousness inaugurated by Jesus" and Hans Dieter Betz is right when he notes that these verses "are certainly opposed to war

⁹⁹ This is in contradistinction to many New Testament studies that assume a negative understanding of imperialism among the denizens of the Roman Empire and the authors of the New Testament.

¹⁰⁰ For one of the most prominent anti-Roman readings of Matthew and one with which I fundamentally disagree, see Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001); Carter, "Matthew and Empire," in *Empire and the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Cynthia Long Westfall, McMaster New Testament Studies 10 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 90–119.

¹⁰¹ Note the divine passives in Matt 5:4 (παρακληθήσονται), 6 (χορτασθήσονται), 7 (ἐλεηθήσονται), 9 (κληθήσονται).

¹⁰² For a description of how Rome conducted wars, see Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.72.3–4.

¹⁰³ In John, Jesus commands Peter to do the same but the motivation differs, for Jesus traces the return of the sword to the scabbard to his willingness to drink the cup that God has given him (18:10).

and strife, whether personal or corporate.”¹⁰⁴ For early Christians who followed Jesus’s teaching in Matthew’s Gospel, it is difficult to believe that they would have echoed the same pro-imperial and pro-Roman sentiments found in inscriptions such as “love” (φίλος) for Rome or the desire that her “power never comes to an end” (κράτος οὐποτ’ ὀλῆται).¹⁰⁵

On the other hand, early Christians adopted and redefined imperialistic language found in epigraphy but almost always to describe God’s righteous imperialistic work in the world through the gospel.¹⁰⁶ Jesus and the earliest Christians proclaimed God’s βασιλεία, a term loaded with ancient political and imperialistic connotations, as evidenced in inscriptions and papyri of the period.¹⁰⁷ Outside the Gospels, the highest number of occurrences of βασιλεία are found in the New Testament work most openly critical of Rome, Revelation. The author (whom I call the Revelator) describes the Christian movement as a βασιλεία (Rev 1:6, 9; 5:10), the same term he uses to describe Rome’s empire (Rev 16:10; 17:12, 17–18). However, unlike Rome, which conquers through warfare and controlling trade and commerce, God’s βασιλεία advances because of his and the Lamb’s direct actions (Rev 2:12–16; 11:15; 19:11–19; 20:8). Like other βασιλεῖαι, God’s βασιλεία has a divinely appointed monarch, Jesus the Messiah. It is God,

¹⁰⁴ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, Hermeneia, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 281. Hans Dieter Betz (*The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–49)*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995], 138) notes of Matt 5:9, “To the extent, therefore, that peacemaking is a function of righteousness and the kingdom of God, the work of the disciples as peacemaking agents of God has indeed political implications. The antitheses (5:21–48) are certainly opposed to war and strife, whether personal or corporate.” For a collection of early Christians texts on violence, see Ronald J. Sider, *The Early Church on Killing: A Comprehensive Sourcebook on War, Abortion, and Capital Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

¹⁰⁵ IRT 282 = Tantillo and Bigi, *Leptis Magna*, no. 84; Taeuber, “Graffiti,” 140, no. GR 73.

¹⁰⁶ See Karl Galinsky’s (“The Cult of the Roman Emperor: Uniter or Divider?,” in *Rome and Religion: A Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue on the Imperial Cult*, eds. Jeffrey Brodd and Jonathan L. Reed [Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011], 11–12) fine discussion in which he demonstrates how appropriation of imperial concepts and phrases is not something that only early Christians did, but was “a standard feature in Greek and Roman texts.” Moreover, such appropriations are not “purely negative contestations. Rather, they are synthesized into a more perfect version of the same concept.” In addition, see Christoph Heilig’s (*The Apostle and the Empire: Paul’s Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome*, with a foreword by John M. G. Barclay [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022], quote from 99) excellent contextual discussion of 2 Cor 2:14 in which he concludes that Paul, while not calling the Corinthian Christians to revolt, nevertheless challenges “basic assumptions of Roman ideology.” See also Heilig’s essay in this work. Finally, see Teresa Morgan’s (*Being ‘in Christ’ in the Letters of Paul: Saved through Christ and in his Hands*, WUNT 449 [Berlin: Mohr Siebeck, 2020], 181–92) work on the Christian *ekklesia* as empire.

¹⁰⁷ Matt 4:17/Mark 1:15/Luke 6:20/John 3:3; etc. Acts 1:3; etc.; Heb 12:28; Jas 2:5; 2 Pet 1:11; Rev 1:6; etc. For recent discussions of the royal connotations of βασιλεία in papyri and inscriptions respectively, see Giovanni Battista Bazzana, “‘Basileia’ and Debt Relief: The Forgiveness of Debts in the Lord’s Prayer in the Light of Documentary Papyri,” *CBQ* 73 (2011): 511–25; Burnett, *Paul*, 151–53.

this king, and his angelic host who conquer others (Rev 5:5; 6:2; 17:14) by righteous warfare (Rev 19:11). Although the dragon has declared war on Christians (Rev 12:17), the latter fight nonviolently and conquer it through the Lamb's blood and their faithfulness to God and his Messiah (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7), even if it means their martyrdom (Rev 2:13; 11:7; 13:7).¹⁰⁸ In the end, God is the one who destroys Rome by rendering righteous judgment upon her for her sin, a prospect in which the Revelator glories: "Babylon the great has fallen, fallen!" (Rev 18:1–8). His understanding of God's βασιλεία and its ultimate defeat of Rome is in stark contrast, as we have seen, to the desire of at least one third century AD inhabitant of or visitor to *insula* 4 of Terrace House 2 in Ephesus, a city to which the Revelator directed his message (Rev 2:1–7). The graffitist boasts that Rome is "the βασιλεία of all" (πανβασιλια) and hopes that her "power never comes to an end" (τὸ σὸν κράτος οὔποτ' ὀληται).¹⁰⁹

While God's βασιλεία is not as prevalent in Paul's writings, his evangelistic homilies and catechesis must have focused on it, both in its already and not-yet components.¹¹⁰ I have argued elsewhere that because of what one today would call the political connotations of the term in question, the apostle's and his converts use of βασιλεία in mid-first century AD Thessalonica led to difficulties for Paul and the nascent Christian community. It is evident from the Thessalonian correspondence that the apostle heralded God's βασιλεία, even noting that by having faith in the gospel the God of Israel had called the Thessalonian Christians "into his own kingdom and glory."¹¹¹ Surviving Thessalonian inscriptions attest that this term and its cognate βασιλεύς have a long history in the city going back to the days when it was a seat of power for the heirs of Alexander the Great and his βασιλεία. The city passed a decree in 223 BC, which was dated by the year in which "Antigonus reigned as king" (βασιλεύοντος Ἀντιγόνου).¹¹² Between 221 and 179 BC, Thessalonica set up an honorary statue of King Philip V acclaiming him "King Philip, son of King Demetrius" (βασιλεὺς Φίλιππος βασιλέως Δημητρίου).¹¹³ The Thessalonians never forgot their political heritage and the second and third centuries AD witnessed a revival of interest in Alexander the Great and the city's namesake, Queen Thessalonica. Two epigraphs that

¹⁰⁸ Craig R. Koester (*Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 38A [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014], 217) concludes of Christians in Revelation: "The redeemed will 'reign' only through the resurrection that enables them to participate fully in the benefits of Christ's reign."

¹⁰⁹ Taeuber, "Graffiti," 140, no. GR 73.

¹¹⁰ Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 4:20; 6:9–10; 15:24, 50; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5; Col 4:11; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:5; 2 Tim 4:1. For more information, see Karl Paul Donfried, "The Kingdom of God in Paul," in *The Kingdom of God in 20th-Century Interpretation*, ed. Wendell Willis (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 175–90.

¹¹¹ εἰς τὴν ἐαυτοῦ βασιλείαν καὶ δόξαν (1 Thess 1:10; 2:12; 4:13–18; 2 Thess 1:5).

¹¹² IG 10.2.1.2.

¹¹³ IG 10.2.1.25.

probably identified statues of the two aforementioned individuals attest to these honors. The first hails Alexander as “King Zeus Alexander” (Διός Ἀλέξανδρον βασιλέα) and the second the city’s namesake as “Queen Thessalonica, daughter of Philip” (Θεσσαλονίκην Φιλίππου βασιλισσαν).¹¹⁴ Finally, although not an inscription, a surviving epigram by Antipater from Thessalonica, written during Augustus’s reign, calls the emperor his “brave king” (τὸν ἐμὸν βασιλῆα τὸν ἄλκιμον).¹¹⁵ All this means that the pagan Thessalonians probably understood the early Christian proclamation of God’s βασιλεία as the announcement of a new kingdom that differed from the one that currently reigned over their city, which, in the words of Acts of the Apostles, also meant a new βασιλεύς, Jesus (Acts 17:7).¹¹⁶ For this reason, the author of Acts notes that the non-Christian Thessalonians claimed that their Christian counterparts were turning the world, or less hyperbolically, the world of Thessalonica, upside down (Acts 17:6) by threatening to undermine the peaceful and prosperous status quo of the city (1 Thess 5:3). To deal with this situation, the Thessalonian *politarchs* expelled Paul from their city and the pagan Thessalonians placed social and economic pressure on believers to renounce their new allegiance to God’s βασιλεία and his βασιλεύς and return to the paganfold (Act 17:1–9; 1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; 3:3, 7; 2 Thess 1:4–6).¹¹⁷

4 Conclusion

To conclude and summarize, inscriptions are direct witnesses of the past, the surviving number of which is over half a million and counting. Because ancient governments and individuals, aristocrats and plebs, men and women, slave and free set up epigraphs for various purposes, there is great diversity among inscriptions with regard to the media on which they are engraved and the content

¹¹⁴ *IG 10.2.1.275; IG 10.2.1.277.* Despite claims of some New Testament scholars, Christoph vom Brocke (*Thessaloniki – Stadt des Kassander und Gemeinde des Paulus*, WUNT II/125 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001], 138) and Gene J. Green (*The Letters to the Thessalonians*, PNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 39), divine honors for Alexander the Great appear not date to the first century AD but seem to be a later revival of Hellenism in the second and third centuries AD. See Victoria Allamani-Souri, “The Imperial Cult,” in *Roman Thessaloniki*, ed. D. V. Grammenos, trans. David Hardy, Thessaloniki Archaeological Museum Publication 1 (Thessaloniki: Archaeological Museum, 2003), 107–8.

¹¹⁵ *Greek Anthology* 10.25.

¹¹⁶ If the early Christian proclamation in Thessalonica centered on Jesus's enthronement at God's right hand, which it probably did, then it is even more probable that the pagan Thessalonians understood the religio-political significance of Paul's preaching of God's kingdom. For more on Jesus's enthronement in its Greco-Roman context, see D. Clint Burnett, *Christ's Enthronement at God's Right Hand and Its Greco-Roman Cultural Context*, BZNW 242 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021).

¹¹⁷ For a larger discussion, see Burnett, *Paul*, 151–53; Burnett, *Studying*, 109–20.

with which they deal. For these reasons, epigraphy (along with archaeology and numismatics) is one of our best sources for reconstructing the social histories of various regions and cities in the Greco-Roman world and for providing vistas into the worldviews of a broader swath of the classical world than aristocratic men. Despite the diversity of epigraphs, almost all extant inscriptions, both public and private, either directly or indirectly express pro-imperial and pro-Roman sentiments. Any negative epigraphic expressions are directed against particular empires such as Rome or particular Romans such as Nero. However, the former negative sentiments are made from a pro-imperialist context in which Rome is the imperialistic competitor and the latter negative expressions stem from actions taken by the Roman senate or the Roman emperor against a particular Roman. Therefore, by in large epigraphy attests that most Greeks and Romans had a positive view of imperialism. Because of this, two productive lines of inquiry in using inscriptions to study the New Testament would be in exploring how early Christianity both challenges and/or redefines conceptions of imperialism found in epigraphy. This essay has provided three cursory examples of these: the teaching of Jesus in the Matthew's Gospel and the Sermon on the Mount, which opposes the use of violence of any kind, and the author of Revelation and the apostle Paul who redefine imperialism to produce a Christian form of it in which God and his divine royal co-regent, the Messiah Jesus, conquer the world through the gospel.

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Numismatics

Heads of State, Tails of Resistance

Michael P. Theophilos

1 Why Coins?

Every coin tells a story, be it one of *production* (mining, alloying, die engraving, striking, distribution through mints and treasuries), *circulation* (use in markets, shops, ports in daily exchange; military pay; civic distributions), *transport* (along trade routes, across imperial frontiers, with armies and merchants), *taxation* (imperial levies, provincial tribute, temple taxes), *ritual use* (votive offerings, temple deposits, foundation rituals), *social function* (used in dowries, gifts, legal fines, and public games), the agony of *loss* (hoarded in times of crisis, dropped in fields and homes, lost at sea), or the joy of *repurposing* (worn as jewellery, cut for silver, melted, countermarked, re-struck); or the finality of *post-depositional use* (burial in graves, hoards, rediscovery through excavation, study in museum collections). In each case, coins preserve more than monetary value; they record imperial ambition, regional identity, and the ordinary touch of countless hands.

The study of coins, known as numismatics, provides a critical lens for examining imperial narratives in the ancient world, particularly within the Greco-Roman context. At a minimum, ancient coinage offers insights into: (i) *Historical* context, through primary source data regarding rulers, dates, and events in a specific region¹; (ii) *Cultural* insights into preferences and norms, including a diachronic record of cultural influence²; (iii) *Economic* context, through attestations of regional trade networks, or even insights into economic means and status regarding the variety and extent of coinage an individual hoarded³; (iv) *Ritual* contexts, including insights into observances, rites and ceremonial practices

¹ Christopher Howgego, *Ancient History from Coins* (London: Routledge, 1995). For a quantitative approach to the historical contribution of coinage see François de Callataÿ, *L'histoire des guerres mithridatiques vue par les monnaies*, *Numismatica Lovaniensia* 18 (Louvain-la-Neuve: Département d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art, Séminaire de numismatique Marcel Hoc, 1997).

² See further Liv Mariah Yarrow, *The Roman Republic to 49 BCE: Using Coins as Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

³ See further Andrew Burnett, *Coinage in the Roman World* (London: Seaby, 1987) who surveys the employment of Roman and Republican and Imperial coinage as economic evidence.

which illuminate the philosophical worldview (gods, values, attitudes, traditions) of the ancients⁴; (v) *Linguistic* context, including phonetics (sound), morphology (morphemes), syntax (structures), semantics (meaning), pragmatics (social meaning), sociolinguistics (society), historical linguistics (diachronic relationship), dialectology (form), and script (writing systems)⁵; (vi) *Social* contexts, contributing to our understanding of social structures (elite, common, marginalised) and relationships (family, kinship) in the ancient world⁶; (vii) *Political* context, which provides direct insights into how rulers wanted to be perceived (messages of power, authority, and legitimacy), strategies of imperialism and colonisation⁷; (viii) *Civic* context, to help interpret and decode local community identity and sense of autonomy within the wider Mediterranean context⁸; (ix) *Iconographic* context, which – by attending to numismatic motifs, aesthetic designs and artistic techniques – provides clarification on the range, meaning and localised use of emblematic symbols, but also attitudes and values in both idealised or realistic portraiture⁹; and not least, (x) *Material* context, encompassing technologies, materials, innovations, and practices involved in local production and circulation of coinage.¹⁰

⁴ See further Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: Volume 1, A History; Volume 2, A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1.3, 32–34, 62.n.190, 69, 77–78, 101–2, 141.n71; 2.15, 35, 145–14, 189, 205, 218–19.

⁵ See further John E. Hartmann, “The Contribution of Greek Numismatic Epigraphy to Other Fields of Knowledge,” *North American Journal of Numismatics* 8 (1969): 43–44; Wolfgang Leschhorn, *Lexikon der Aufschriften auf griechischen Münzen, Band I: Geographische Begriffe, Götter und Heroen, Mythische Gestalten, Persönlichkeiten, Titel und Beinamen, Agonsitik* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2002); *Band II: Ethnika und “Beamtennamen”* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009) categorises Greek and Latin inscriptions that relate to geography, personalities, gods, heroes, mythical figures, personifications, titles and other named objects.

⁶ See further Seth Bernard, “The Social History of Early Roman Coinage,” *JRS* 108 (2018): 1–26.

⁷ See further Andrew Meadows and Jonathan Williams, “Moneta and the Monuments: Coinage and Politics in Republican Rome,” *JRS* 91 (2001): 27–49; W. E. Metcalf, “Whose Liberalitas? Propaganda and Audience in the Early Roman Empire,” *Rivista Italiana di Numismatica e Scienze Affini* 95 (1993): 337–46.

⁸ See further Christopher Howgego, Volker Heuchert, and Andrew Burnett, *Coinage and Identity in the Roman Provinces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁹ See further Karsten Dahmen, *The Legend of Alexander the Great on Greek and Roman Coins* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁰ See further R. Amiram and A. Eitan. “Excavations in the Courtyard of the Citadel, Jerusalem 1968–1969,” *IEJ* 20 (1970): 9–17, which includes a report on the discovery of a fragment of a stone mould for casting coin flans at the mint in Jerusalem. John Casey and Richard Reece, *Coins and the Archaeologist* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1974) provide an archaeological numismatic methodology.

2 The Evolution of Coinage

Before the invention of coinage, human societies developed various ways of conducting trade. Barter, the direct exchange of goods or services, was the most common method, though it had serious limitations. The requirement for both parties to desire what the other offered made complex trade inefficient. To overcome these issues, many early cultures turned to token or commodity money. Ancient writers do not provide any kind of systematic investigation into the origins or philosophical nature of coinage. However, at a critical junction of Plato's *Republic* (II, 371b), Socrates leads Adeimantus to the idea that an ideal city will have coinage to facilitate local trade, “Well then; in the city itself how will they exchange with one another what they make? It was, after all, for this purpose that we created a community and founded a city. ‘Clearly,’ he said, ‘by buying and selling.’ ‘And from this there will come into being a market, and coinage as a token for the purpose of exchange.’ ‘Certainly.’”¹¹

Coinage first arose in Lydia in the 7th century BCE.¹² Herodotus (1.94) observes that the Lydians were the “first people of whom we have knowledge who struck coinage of gold and silver (νόμισμα χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργύρου), and were the first who became small scale retailers (κάπτηλοι).” The electrum coins of Lydia however, were not intended for small-scale transactions, given their high intrinsic value. Instead, they served as state-sanctioned instruments, likely used in official or religious payments. Lydia's rivers, particularly the Pactolus, were rich in electrum deposits. The coins were irregularly shaped and stamped with emblematic images, such as a lion attacking a bull. The reverse bore a deep incuse punch mark, a result of the striking technique. The lion motif probably served as a royal emblem, linking the coin's authority to the ruling house.¹³ One of the greatest innovations of these early coins was their function as a certified store of value. The variation in natural electrum's gold content made weighing and assessing purity difficult. A stamped coin verified both the weight and implied

¹¹ Cited in J. Melville Jones, *Testimonia Numaria, Greek and Latin Texts Concerning Ancient Greek Coinage, Volume I: Texts and Translations* (London: Spink and Son, 1993), 3.

¹² Koray Konuk, “Asia Minor to the Ionian Revolt,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage*, ed. William E. Metcalf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 43.

¹³ E. S. G. Robinson, “The Coins from the Ephesian Artemision Reconsidered,” *JHS* 71 (1951): 156–67; Konuk, “Asia Minor,” 48; Liselotte Weidauer, *Probleme der Frühen Elektronprägung* (Freiburg: Office du livre, 1975); Andreas Furtwängler, “Neue Beobachtungen zur frühesten Münzprägung,” *Schweizerische Numismatische Rundschau* 65 (1986): 153–65; M. J. Price, “Thoughts on the Beginnings of Coinage,” in *Studies in Numismatic Method Presented to Philip Grierson*, eds B. H. I. Stewart, Christopher N. L. Brooke, J. G. Pollard, and T. R. Volk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4; Ian Carradice and Martin Price, *Coinage in the Greek World* (London: Seaby, 1988), 30; Robinson, “Coins”; Colin M. Kraay, *Archaic and Classical Greek Coins* (London: Methuen, 1976), 21–22; Robert W. Wallace, “The Origin of Electrum Coinage,” *AJA* 91 (1987): 385; Dyfri Williams, “The Pot Hoard from the Archaic Artemision of Ephesus,” *BICS* 38 (1991–1993): 98–103.

quality of the metal, eliminating the need for expert valuation in every transaction. Croesus (561–546 BCE) King of Lydia replaced electrum coinage with issues in pure gold and pure silver. Persian conquest of Asia Minor in 546 BCE saw Cyrus continue minting in the same style in both gold and silver issues at Sardis down to 520 BCE with little iconographic variation.¹⁴ With the arrival of Darius I (521–486) coinage underwent a significant shift both in terms of representation and weight standard.¹⁵

Greek city-states quickly adopted and adapted the idea of coinage for their own civic needs.¹⁶ By the late sixth century BCE, several Greek poleis were minting their own coins. These coins were often made of silver and bore distinctive local symbols. For example, Aegina, an early adopter, issued staters bearing a sea turtle. Athens later issued the iconic tetradrachms featuring the helmeted head of Athena and an owl, alongside the inscription AΘΕ (for Athenaion, “of the Athenians”).¹⁷ Greek coins were deeply tied to civic identity. Each city chose imagery representing its myths, deities, or values. Corinth’s coins depicted Pegasus and Athena, linked to the city’s heroic founder Bellerophon. Rhodes featured the sun god Helios and a rose, a visual pun on the city’s name. These images served as visual assertions of independence and culture, fostering trust and recognisability in trade. Over time, the consistency of certain types, like the Athenian owl, made them widely trusted and imitated across the Mediterranean.

Rome initially lacked coinage and relied on bronze ingots called *aes rude*.¹⁸ These evolved into cast bronze bars (*aes signatum*) and round coins (*aes grave*) by the 4th century BCE. These objects were heavy and of limited utility outside local exchange. As Rome expanded and encountered Greek influence in southern Italy, it began to adopt silver coinage. Around 300–280 BCE, Rome issued its first struck silver coins, modelled on Greek types. One example features Hercules on the obverse and the she-wolf with Romulus and Remus on the reverse. These early Roman coins combined familiar Hellenic motifs with emerging Roman myths, asserting identity while participating in shared Mediterranean coin traditions. The Second Punic War (218–201 BCE) marked a turning point. In 211 BCE, Rome introduced the silver *denarius*, a coin valued at ten bronze asses. This became the cornerstone of Roman coinage for centuries. Early denarii showed Roma and the Dioscuri, but soon the designs expanded. By

¹⁴ Ian Carradice, “The ‘Regal’ Coinage of the Persian Empire,” in *Coinage and Administration in the Athenian and Persian Empires*, ed. Ian Carradice (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 1987), 73–108.

¹⁵ Theodore V. Buttrey, *Greek, Roman, and Islamic Coins from Sardis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) 1981.

¹⁶ Helen Hill Miller, *Greece Through the Ages, as Seen by Travelers from Herodotus to Byron* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1972), 162.

¹⁷ Jean Elsen, “La stabilité du système pondéral et monétaire attique (VIe–IIe s. avant notre ère),” *RBN* 148 (2002): 1–32.

¹⁸ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 33.13.43.

the 2nd century BCE, coinage became a means of political expression. The magistrates in charge of minting (moneymen) began featuring family ancestors and achievements. However, the first living Roman to be portrayed on the obverse of Roman coinage was Julius Caesar. By placing his own living image on coinage, Caesar was reviving a Hellenistic-style monarchy. Traditionally minded Romans found this move deeply suspicious, even outrageous, as it centralised power and loyalty around Caesar in a manner reminiscent of kingship.¹⁹

The coinage of Augustus is vast, complicated, and intensely personal and political. Although Caesar was the first to put his own living image on a coin, Augustus took up the mandate with such enthusiasm that his efforts in numismatic representation far surpass any other in the first century CE. During his 56 years of operation, first as Octavian then as Augustus, he put millions of coins into circulation in gold, silver and bronze. There are at least 48 types of imperial obverse portraits, accompanied by a variety of at least 127 different obverse inscriptions, 216 different reverse inscriptions, and 202 different reverse types. The imperial coinage of Augustus was minted in at least 13 locations (Africa, Antioch, Berytos, Colonia Patricia, Emerita, Ephesus, Greece, Lugdunum, Nemausus, Nicomedia, Pergamum, Roma, and Spain), excluding his portable mints which could accompany an army. A significant evolution in iconography is evident on the Augustan coinage, in that he not only portrays himself, contemporaries, or illustrious ancestors, but younger members of his family, namely the next generation of rulers.

Imperial mints, including those in the provinces, mass-produced coins in gold, silver, and bronze. These circulated across the empire, standardising Roman power visually and materially. Coinage thus helped unite the diverse territories under Roman control. Yet Rome also permitted a degree of regional expression. Provincial mints in cities from Syria to Spain generally produced bronze coins with the emperor's image on one side and local symbols on the other. One estimate suggests up to 100,000 unique types, from over five hundred cities from Caesar to Diocletian.²⁰ In the Greek East, inscriptions were often in Greek, and imagery reflected local deities, myths, or festivals. This fusion of imperial and civic iconography allowed communities to assert identity within the broader imperial framework. Roman provincial coinage attests to one part of how the identity of the inhabitants of a city was cultivated and articulated in a particular historical context. Indeed, Fergus Millar suggests that "the most explicit symbols of

¹⁹ For the evolution of iconography into dynastic portraiture under Caesar see Andreas Alföldi, *Caesar in 44 v. Chr. Vol. 2, Das Zeugnis der Münzen. Antiquitas 3.17* (Bonn: R. Habelt, 1974).

²⁰ Volker Heuchert, "The Chronological Development of Roman Provincial Coin Iconography" in *Coinage and Identity in the Roman Provinces*, eds. Christopher Howgego, Volker Heuchert, and Andrew Burnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 29–56.

a city's identity and status were its coins,”²¹ however concedes that “a multitude of problems”²² lie behind that statement. One complication is that a single workshop could produce coinage for multiple cities.²³ Howgego considers the overall pattern of the provincial evidence in five categories: 1) Religion: where polytheism left room for localism, specifically polis-religion not private-religion; 2) Monumentality: the practice of putting buildings on coins, which was essentially a Roman innovation;²⁴ 3) Representation of the past: mythological and historical events tying the city, especially so, given the realities of increasing Roman power; 4) Language choice: Latin in the west vs. Greek in the east, the only exception being Roman *coloniae* using Latin in the east in recognition of their Roman status; and 5) Romanness: the degree of identification with imperial power.²⁵ Howgego helpfully highlights that “coins were a *deliberate* advertisement of *public* identity,”²⁶ in the sense that they are self-identified (deliberate) and widely publicised/broadcast (public).

In sum, the development of coinage marks one of the most consequential innovations in ancient economic and political life. Its origins in Lydia represented a solution to the problem of variable-value electrum, introducing a stamped guarantee of weight and worth that would eventually revolutionise the exchange of goods and services. Greek city-states expanded this innovation into a civic art form, transforming coins into carriers of local identity, religious symbolism, and shared cultural memory. Each stater or tetradrachm bore not only economic value but also the myths, values, and visual language of its issuing polis. Rome, inheriting and reconfiguring the legacy of Greek and Hellenistic coinage, elevated money into a formal instrument of state ideology. From the austere cast bronzes of the early Republic to the refined portraiture of the late Empire, Roman coinage became a key medium for expressing power, lineage, loyalty, and divine sanction. The innovations of Augustus in particular, by virtue of sheer volume, geographic scope, and dynastic messaging, set a precedent for the political utility of currency that would endure throughout imperial history. Yet Rome also accommodated provincial expression, as evidenced by the extraordinary diversity of local issues, which affirmed both imperial unity and regional identity. Coinage thus served as a material nexus of authority and allegiance. It facilitated commerce

²¹ Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 BC–AD 337* (London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 257.

²² Millar, *Roman*, 257.

²³ Konrad Kraft, *Das System der kaiserzeitlichen Münzprägung in Kleinasien* (Berlin: Mann, 1972).

²⁴ Andrew Meadows and Jonathan Williams, “Moneta and the Monuments: Coinage and Politics in Republican Rome,” *JRS* 91 (2001): 27–49.

²⁵ Christopher Howgego, “Coinage and Identity in the Roman Provinces” in *Coinage and Identity in the Roman Provinces*, eds. Christopher Howgego, Volker Heuchert, and Andrew Burnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1–17.

²⁶ Howgego, “Coinage and Identity,” 1, *italics original*.

and taxation, commemorated victories, and established dynastic legitimacy. Its iconography functioned simultaneously on multiple levels, imperial and civic, religious and historical, public and personal. Coins articulated not only who ruled, but also how people across the empire saw themselves in relation to power, place, and past. Across cultures, metals, and empires, coinage was never merely economic; it was a portable script of civilisation itself. Such power in imagery and text raises important questions about how we interpret these coins as historical evidence, which we address next.

3 Methodological Limitations

The incorporation of numismatic evidence into historical study necessarily raises methodological questions such as ‘*Can we trust them?*’ ‘*Did people notice them?*’ and ‘*Whose past do they reconstruct?*’ One frequently encounters reference to the term “propaganda” in discussions of ancient coinage.²⁷ In standard English usage, the term is typically employed pejoratively to describe politically motivated information designed to advance a particular point of view.²⁸ This is typified in George Orwell’s maxim, “all propaganda is lies, even when one is telling the

²⁷ On the use of coins in Roman propaganda see Howgego, *Ancient History*, 62–87; A. H. M. Jones, “Numismatics and History” in *The Roman Economy: Studies in Ancient Economic and Administrative History*, ed. P. Brunt. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 61–81; Michael H. Crawford, “Roman Imperial Coin Types and the Formation of Public Opinion,” in *Studies in Numismatic Method Presented to Philip Grierson*, ed. C. Brooke, B. Steward, J. Pollard, and T. Volk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 47–64; Barbara Levick, “Propaganda and the Imperial Coinage,” *Antichthon* 16 (1982): 104–16; C. Ehrhardt, “Roman Coin Types and the Roman Public,” *JNG* 34 (1984): 41–54; Andrew Meadows and Jonathan Williams, “Moneta and the Monuments: Coinage and Politics in Republican Rome,” *JRS* 91 (2001): 27–49. For earlier Republic coins see Andrew Burnett, “Iconography of Roman Coin Types in the Third Century bc,” *NumC* 146 (1986): 67–75.; Andreas Alföldi, “The Main Aspects of Political Propaganda on the Coinage of the Roman Republic,” in *Essays in Roman Coinage Presented to Harold Mattingly*, ed. R. A. G. Carson and C. H. V. Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 63–95. H. Flower, *Ancestor Marks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); P. V. Hill, “Coin Symbolism and Propaganda During the Wars of Vengeance (44–36 b.c.),” *Quaderni Ticinese* 4 (1975): 157–207. For discussion of propaganda and coins of the Imperial period see Tonio Hölscher, *Staatsdenkmal und Publikum: vom Untergang der Republik bis zur Festigung des Kaisertums in Rom* (Konstanz: Konstanzer althistorische Vorträge und Forschungen 9, 1984); Pierre Bastien, *Le buste monétaire des empereurs romains* (Wetteren: Editions numismatiques romaines, 1992); Niels Hannestad, *Roman Art and Imperial Policy* (Aarhus: University Press, 1986); C. H. V. Sutherland, *Coinage in Roman Imperial Policy 31 B.C. – A.D. 68* (London: Methuen, 1951); A. Wallace-Hadrill, “The Emperor and His Virtues,” *Historia* 30 (1981): 298–323; Carlos F. Noreña, “The Communication of the Emperor’s Virtues,” *JRS* 91 (2001): 146–68; Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988); A. Wallace-Hadrill, “Image and Authority in the Coinage of Augustus,” *JRS* 76 (1986): 66–87.

²⁸ First appearing with this meaning on Dec 7th in 1822 in a letter of the Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle, see “propaganda, n.,” *OED Online*, December 2016 (Oxford University Press,

truth.”²⁹ Jane DeRose Evans, however, suggests that within the Roman empire the concept was subtler and had a more neutral definition, “the educational efforts or information used by an organized group that is made available to a selected audience, for the specific purpose of making the audience take a particular course of action or conform to a certain attitude desired by the organized group.”³⁰ J. Ellul argues that propaganda is any effort to change the audience’s opinion or indeed any form of communication.³¹ While this broader definition may well be difficult to fully substantiate, its essence resonates with modern notions of communication theory.³² Leonard W. Doob thus notes that if this is the case, propaganda and education would be extremely difficult to separate.³³ The typological development of coinage reflects an ongoing process of revision and rearticulation, whereby specific events and policy initiatives are selectively foregrounded. As these numismatic forms shift over time, they do so in striking correspondence with the broader political reconfigurations. Harold Mattingly notes that “the possible influence of such coinage on public opinion could not possibly be overlooked or minimized by the Emperor. He must ... have censored, if not inspired it.”³⁴ The various media available in this effort of persuasion in the ancient Roman world reinforced Roman ideals. Everything from architecture and inscriptions to the provision of “conveniences” (*commoda*) such as public leisure (baths), mass entertainment (chariot racing, gladiatorial games), and processions (*triumphus*), contributed to a well-defined Roman cultural narrative. Coins distinctly contribute to our understanding of this phenomenon due to their ubiquity, distribution, and continuous use. J. R. Fears suggests that the numismatic material is *preferable* to any other evidence in the discernment of imperial ideology because the “literary sources are secondary sources; at their best, they are idiosyncratic, and at their worst they consciously distort the deeds and intentions of individual emperors.”³⁵ This is particularly evident in the case

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/152605?rskey=JegCgh&result=1>, accessed December 20, 2016).

²⁹ Diary entry 14 March 1942, George Orwell, *All Propaganda is Lies, 1941–1942*, ed. Peter H. Davison (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 229.

³⁰ Jane DeRose Evans, *The Art of Persuasion: Political Propaganda from Aeneas to Brutus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 1.

³¹ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), xi–xiii, 61.

³² James Price Dillard, “Persuasion,” in *Handbook of Communication and Science*, ed. Charles R. Berger, Michael E. Roloff, and David R. Roskos-Ewoldsen (London: Sage Publishers, 1987), 203–18.

³³ Leonard W. Doob, *Public Opinion and Propaganda*, 2nd ed. (Hambden: Archon Books, 1966), 240.

³⁴ Harold Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, vol. 3 (London: British Museum, 1936), xlvi.

³⁵ J. Rufus Fears, “The Cult of Virtues and Roman Imperial Ideology,” *ANRW* 17.2 (1981): 945. It is what Andrew Meadows refers to as a “a privileged place in the discourse between king

of Trajan. Despite his celebrated status in Roman historiography, much of what occurred during his reign, and especially his true intentions, remains elusive. The coinage of Trajan offers an immediate, though no less constructed, insight. While it does not grant access to what “really” transpired, it does accurately reveal what the Roman state *wanted* its people to believe had taken place. Fears concludes that coinage is the “medium by which we can best approach the ideology of the imperial system.”³⁶ Although literary sources may never reveal the historical intentions of the ruling elite, be they in Rome or in the provinces, coinage reveals, at a minimum, an objective perspective of how rulers wanted their subjects to perceive their political activity. E.A. Judge alludes to a similar phenomenon of the treatment of history by ancient writers, “in the case of Roman history, we typically mean by ‘documents’ the coins, inscriptions, and papyri that survive directly from the time, as distinct from the treatment of the history by ancient writers.”³⁷ While ancient coins were certainly not ideologically neutral, they accurately reflect how the emperor desired to be perceived.³⁸ In this respect, the image and text in particular (given its specificity) can be used to record how the language was being used and in what ways it was being employed.³⁹

The study of numismatic evidence is not simply a matter of decoding official messages (accurate or otherwise); it also requires consideration of audience reception. A coin may carry ideological content, but its impact depends on whether

and subjects,” Andrew Meadows, “The Spread of Coins in the Hellenistic World,” in *Explaining Money and Financial Innovation: A Historical Analysis*, ed. Peter Bernholz and Roland Vaubel (New York: Springer, 2014), 173.

³⁶ Fears, “The Cult of Virtues”, 945.

³⁷ E.A. Judge, “Setting the Record Straight: Alternative Documents of a Protest in the Roman Army of Egypt,” in *The First Christians in the Roman World: Augustan and New Testament Essays*, ed. James R. Harrison, WUNT 229 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 378.

³⁸ Catherine M. Murphy notes that, “coins are government-sponsored art, and coin iconography therefore usually reflects the official ideology by means of recognizable symbols. The wide circulation of these coins thus affords an opportunity for political propaganda,” Catherine M. Murphy, *Wealth in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Qumran Community* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 316. Andrew Burnett is in agreement when he observes that “self-representation in this way was never as systematically developed as the products of modern propaganda machines, but, as with the study of portraiture, it can be very revealing about the aspirations and claims of any regime, matters which are as interesting to the historian as the reality of what actually happened, Andrew Burnett, *Coins: Interpreting the Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 37. Similarly Mark A. Chancey, “coins provide a clear example of government-sponsored inscriptions, their designs chosen by and expressing the values of social elites,” Mark A. Chancey, “The Epigraphic Habit of Hellenistic and Roman Galilee,” in *Religion, Ethnicity, and Identity in Ancient Galilee: A Region in Transition*, ed. Jürgen Zangenberg, Harold W. Attridge and Dale B. Martin (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 86.

³⁹ Brennan, Turner, and Wright are accurate in stating, “they [coins] are a true reflection of their time – of a ‘face of power’s’ perception of what he had done, what he was going to do, what he was going to get others to do, or what others were going to get him or her to do,” Peter Brennan, Michael Turner, and Nicholas L. Wright, *Faces of Power: Imperial Portraiture on Roman Coins* (Sydney: Nicholson Museum, 2007), 5.

the people handling it understood, recognised, or responded to its imagery and inscriptions. A growing body of literary and material evidence suggests that Roman audiences were not only aware of the imagery and inscriptions on their coinage but could also interpret and respond to these elements with nuance and intention. Far from being passive recipients of imperial messaging, individuals across the empire engaged with the symbolic content of coins in ways that were culturally informed and, at times, politically expressive. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, writing in the late first or early second century CE, provides a striking example. He draws an analogy between moral discernment and the evaluation of coinage: “τοὺς χαρακτῆρας, οὓς ἔχων ἐν τῇ διανοίᾳ ἐλήλυθεν, οἵους καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν νομισμάτων ζητοῦντες, ἂν μὲν εὔρωμεν, δοκιμάζομεν, ἂν δὲ μὴ εὔρωμεν, ρίπτούμεν. τίνος ἔχει τὸν χαρακτῆρα τοῦτο τὸ τετράσσαρον; Τραιανοῦ; φέρε. Νέρωνος; ρῆψον ἔξω, ἀδόκιμόν ἐστιν, σαπρόν” (trans. “the imprints which he brought with him in his mind, such as we look for also upon coins, and, if we find them, we accept the coins, but if we do not find them, we throw the coins away. “Whose imprint does this sestertius bear? Trajan’s? Give it to me. Nero’s? Throw it out, it will not pass, it is rotten.”⁴⁰ Epictetus’ use of coinage as a metaphor for moral discernment illustrates a philosophical idea, but it simultaneously relies on the audience’s familiarity with imperial portraiture and reputational connotations embedded in numismatic imagery. The intelligibility of the analogy presupposes a shared visual and political literacy among those who used the currency. While the images and symbols on the coins were the most noticeable and prominent features,⁴¹ coin inscriptions were used to explain and clarify often complex imagery, further extending a coin’s message for specific purposes.⁴² Furthermore, episodes from late antiquity demonstrate that coins could provoke public reaction. Socrates Scholasticus recounts that the people of Antioch rioted in response to the imperial coinage of Julian (331–363 CE), allegedly exclaiming that his coin “had a bull, and the world was subverted” (*Socrates, Hist. Eccl.* III, 17; PG LXVII, 424–5). Despite Socrates’ inaccurate description which follows, including reference to a non-existent altar on the coinage of Julian, the incident

⁴⁰ Epictetus, *Discourses of Epictetus*, 4.5.16–17. W.A. Oldfather, trans. *Epictetus. Discourses, Books 3–4. Fragments. The Encheiridion* (LCL 218; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 336–37. An important distinction is to be acknowledged between Roman coins and their Greek predecessors. Although “designs on Greek coins typically remained unchanged for decades or even centuries, varying only in style or detail over time” (Jonathan Williams, “Religion and Roman Coins,” in *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. Jörg Rüpke (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 143). Roman coinage exhibited both continuity and discontinuity in its iconography stamped on coinage. It is true that, “it was the usual practice in the ancient world to imitate existing types that were current locally, in order to secure greater confidence in and prestige for a new coin minted by a recently established authority,” (Y. Meshorer, *Jewish Coins of the Second Temple Period* [Tel-Aviv: Am Hassefer, 1967], 58), but it is also apparent that Roman coinage was much more dynamic and adaptable to new images and environments.

⁴¹ Crawford, “Coin Types,” 54–57.

⁴² Howgego, *Ancient History*, 75.

is indicative of the attention to the imagery and inscriptions on coinage by a populace.⁴³ Similarly, the incident concerning Jesus in the temple when asked about paying taxes to Caesar also appeals to the hearers' knowledge of the imagery on a denarius, "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'" (Mt 22:17b–21; cf. Mt 22:15–22; Mk 12:13–17; Lk 20:20–26). Taken together, these examples, among others, indicate that Roman coinage was more than a passive vehicle for state messaging. Rather, it was an active medium of public communication. People noticed coins, interpreted their symbols, and responded to their messages. In this way, coins did not simply reflect imperial ideology; they helped disseminate it, anchor it in social memory, and embed it within the visual and material culture of everyday life.⁴⁴

A specific area of concern in the critical use of coinage for historical and linguistic reconstruction lies in the social origin of the coins themselves, and the degree to which this origin conditions the kinds of narratives we are able to construct. Historians have frequently observed that the production of coinage was almost exclusively the prerogative of a narrow elite, namely, the emperor and those operating under his authority. As such, coins reflect the priorities, self-perceptions, and strategic messaging of this upper stratum of society. To rely solely on numismatic material, then, is not only methodologically questionable but may in some instances lead to a seriously distorted reconstruction of the past. This limitation may seem self-evident, yet its implications are far-reaching. Rather than prompting a wholesale dismissal of numismatic evidence, however, the more balanced response is to acknowledge that coins offer a partial window, one shaped by ideological intention and elite production. While they do not capture the full spectrum of social experience in antiquity, their value lies precisely in what they do reveal: the curated messaging, political imagination, and communicative strategies of imperial authority, as well as their reception within broader society. That said, coins do occasionally break beyond the immediate confines of imperial self-representation. While many coin types issued under the

⁴³ For further evidence that imagery on coins were noticed, especially in the east Roman empire see Linda-Marie Hans, "Der Kaiser mit dem Schwert," *JNG* 33 (1983), 57–66, especially 63–64 and n. 21.

⁴⁴ Tonio Hölscher (*Staatsdenkmal und Publikum*, 20–32) and Paul Zanker (*Power of Images*, 265–95) have persuasively argued that imperial imagery is demonstrably embedded within the private context from Augustus onwards. Zanker notes that numismatic imagery appears on "jewelry and utensils, furniture, textiles, walls and stuccoed ceilings, door jambs, clay facings, roof tiles, and even on tomb monuments and marble ash urns" (Zanker, *Power of Images*, 266).

emperor's authority promote themes such as military victory, divine sanction, or civic generosity, messages crafted to appeal to a wide audience, these motifs remain instruments of imperial communication. Their popularity does not necessarily equate to grassroots expression; rather, they reflect the imperial regime's calculated appeal to shared Roman values and aspirations. However, when we turn to provincial issues (see discussion below), especially those minted by Greek cities or colonial municipalities under Roman rule, we find a more diverse symbolic vocabulary. In these contexts, coinage could reflect local traditions, deities, languages, and civic pride. Provincial coins often incorporated regional iconography or bilingual inscriptions, subtly negotiating between local identity and imperial allegiance. Though still constrained by Roman oversight and ideological boundaries, such issues allow glimpses into how communities in the provinces represented themselves within the framework of empire. These provincial coinages complicate the narrative of top-down ideological control. They suggest a more dialogical process, in which imperial and local symbols coexisted, and were sometimes blurred. Thus, while the vast majority of extant coinage reflects elite priorities, certain provincial types remind us that numismatic material can also bear witness to regional variation, cultural negotiation, and the shaping of local identities under Rome's imperial canopy.

A related concern involves the representativeness of the extant numismatic record. That is, does the corpus of coins available to modern scholars accurately reflect the coinage minted and circulated in antiquity? As C. Howgego has demonstrated, the absolute number of coins recovered from archaeological contexts is heavily conditioned by localised and contingent factors.⁴⁵ Howgego notes, "the hoards left in the ground are the ones that were not recovered in antiquity. Concentrations of coin hoards tend to reflect not prosperity or heavily monetized contexts, but rather the insecurity (particularly warfare) which resulted in owners not recovering their treasure."⁴⁶ This point is crucial. Since hoards tend to contain precious metals, the numismatic picture they present is often skewed toward gold and silver denominations, while lower-value bronze issues, which would have been more common in daily exchange, are underrepresented.⁴⁷ Moreover, our access to ancient coinage is limited not only by survival but also by discovery and publication. As Edwin Yamauchi observes, only a fraction of what is made survives; only a fraction of that is preserved in archaeological sites;

⁴⁵ Howgego, "Supply and Use," 1–31.

⁴⁶ Howgego, *Ancient History*, 88. Cf. Richard Duncan-Jones, *Money and Government in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 85.

⁴⁷ For example, Galba's silver and gold coinage focused on garnering provincial support while bronze coins focused on rallying the urban citizens and featured urban symbols, see Olivier Hekster, "Coins and Messages: Audience Targeting on Coins of Different Denominations?" in *Representation and Perception of Roman Imperial Power*, ed. Paul Erdkamp, Olivier Hekster, G. de Kleijn, Stephan T. A. M. Mols, and Lukas de Blois (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 26.

only a fraction of those sites are excavated; only a fraction of excavated material is examined; and only a fraction of that is ever published.⁴⁸ Even among published material, further distortions arise. Museum collections tend to favour well-preserved, legible, and high-value coins, thereby marginalising low-grade or corroded specimens. In addition, unprovenanced coins, often appearing in private collections or auction catalogues, pose a distinct problem for scholarly reliability, especially when questions of authenticity remain unresolved. In some cases, erroneous attributions or forgeries have entered the academic record, occasionally misleading even experienced researchers.⁴⁹ For these reasons, the present study restricts itself to numismatic material that has appeared in peer-reviewed scholarly publications, with clear documentation of provenance, and where appropriate, engages critically with questions of authenticity. These limitations do not undermine the historical potential of coinage as evidence. Rather, they call for methodological caution and interpretive nuance, recognising both what numismatics can reveal, and what it cannot.

4 Primary Resources: Corpora and Collections

Engagement with ancient coinage begins with the major corpora and curated collections that classify and describe coins according to issuing authority, typology, mint, and date. These primary resources form the backbone of numismatic scholarship, offering the structured data and interpretive annotations required for rigorous academic work. They range from catalogues to searchable digital platforms and curated museum holdings. Scholarly study of ancient coinage is structured around several major categories, each defined by geographic, political, and chronological criteria. Each tradition has its own cataloguing methodology, terminology, and scholarly infrastructure.

4.1 Roman Coinage

Roman coinage can be divided into three major corpora, each corresponding to a distinct sphere of authority and mode of production. The first is Roman Republican Coinage (RRC), comprehensively catalogued by Michael Crawford in his two-volume work.⁵⁰ This corpus spans from the late fourth century BCE to the end of the Republic in 31 BCE and documents the coinage issued by an-

⁴⁸ Edwin Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures* (New York: Holman, 1972), 146–54.

⁴⁹ See for example Joseph Hilarius von Eckhel, *Doctrina numorum veterum*, 8 vols. (Vienna: Sumptibus J. V. Degen, 1792–1839), 4.288–306, who catalogues a list of misreadings in Théodore E. Mionnet, *Description des médailles antiques* (Paris: Toulouse, 1806–1808), 105. Cited in Barbara Burrell, *Neokoroi: Greek Cities and Roman Emperors* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 12.

⁵⁰ Michael Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

nually elected magistrates (monetales). Crawford's typology is organised chronologically, with each issue assigned a unique reference number (e.g., RRC 443/1). Entries include detailed descriptions of obverse and reverse iconography, inscriptions, metal type, average weight, mint locations (where identifiable), and relevant hoard or archaeological evidence. Crawford's work was revolutionary for integrating prosopographical and historical data, as well as hoard analysis, to establish a refined numismatic chronology. Republican coinage is essential for understanding the political propaganda, mythic genealogies, and elite self-representation that defined the Roman Republic. The shift from anonymous coinage to self-portraiture and dynastic imagery in the late Republic provides key evidence for the transition toward monarchical ideology.

Roman Imperial Coinage (RIC) documents the coinage issued under central imperial authority from the reign of Augustus in 27 BCE to the fall of the Western Empire in 476 CE. The RIC series is published in ten volumes, edited by Harold Mattingly, Edward A. Sydenham, and others.⁵¹ In addition to the detailed history of the coinage, including a description of legend, type, and other standard features, the authors provide notation on the rarity of known examples.⁵² Several volumes have been revised, with updated material expected in the process of further revision. Each volume is organised by emperor and subdivided by mint and denomination, assigning a unique RIC number to each coin type (e.g., RIC II.3 123). The entries provide extensive typological information, including bust types, reverse legends and images, officina (workshop division) markings, mint attribution, and dating based on titles and tribunician years.

Roman Provincial Coinage (RPC) catalogues the coinage struck by cities and local authorities across the empire under Roman oversight, particularly in the Eastern provinces. This series was initiated by Andrew Burnett, Michel Amandry, and Pere Pau Ripollès, with the first volume published in 1992.⁵³ RPC coins

⁵¹ Harold Mattingly, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, 10 vols. (London: Spink, 1923–2007).

⁵² The notation is as follows, C: common; R1: rare, only twenty or so known; R2: between five and fifteen known; R3: four or five known; R4: two or three known; R5: only one known, unique.

⁵³ Andrew Burnett, Michel Amandry, and Pere Pau Ripollès, *Roman Provincial Coinage. Volume I: From the Death of Caesar to the Death of Vitellius (44 BC–AD 69)* (London: British Museum Press; Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1992); Michel Amandry and Andrew Burnett, eds., *Roman Provincial Coinage. Volume II: From Vespasian to Domitian (AD 69–96)* (London: British Museum Press; Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1999); Andrew Burnett, Michel Amandry, and Pere Pau Ripollès, *Roman Provincial Coinage. Volume III: Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian (AD 96–138)* (London: British Museum Press; Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2006); Michel Amandry, Julien Olivier, and Kevin Butcher, *Roman Provincial Coinage. Volume IV.4: Antoninus Pius to Commodus (AD 138–192): Alexandria and Egypt* (London: British Museum Press; Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2023); Michel Amandry and Jérôme Mairat, *Roman Provincial Coinage. Volume VII.1: From Gordian I to Gordian III (AD 238–244): Asia* (London: British Museum Press; Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2021); Michel Amandry and Jérôme Mairat, *Roman Provincial Coinage. Volume VII.2: From*

often bear Greek or bilingual inscriptions and display a blend of imperial portraits on the obverse with local deities, civic symbols, and inscriptions on the reverse. Organised by imperial reign and then by city and region, each coin is assigned a volume-specific number (e.g. RPC I 2701). These coins provide invaluable evidence for the local reception of Roman power, including the imperial cult, regional religious syncretism, and civic pride. For scholars of New Testament backgrounds, the RPC corpus offers direct insights into the cities addressed in early Christian texts, such as Ephesus, Pergamum, and Antioch, illustrating how imperial presence was localised and negotiated. Additionally, Ya'akov Meshorer⁵⁴ and David Hendin⁵⁵ catalogue Judaean coinage from the Persian period through the Bar Kochba revolt, including Hasmonean, Herodian, and Roman procuratorial issues. These are essential for understanding the numismatic landscape of Second Temple Judaism and the tensions between Roman imperialism and Jewish religious autonomy.

4.2 Greek Coinage

Archaic and Classical Greek coinage, by contrast, is not unified under a single catalogue but is documented through a combination of regional, institutional, and typological corpora. The most influential is the *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum* (SNG), an international project initiated by the British Academy and now published by various institutions under the patronage of the *International Numismatic Council*. Each SNG volume presents the Greek coin holdings of a particular museum or collection, typically organised geographically by region and city. Coins are numbered sequentially within each volume and include photographic plates, legends, metal type, and references to other catalogues. The SNG is indispensable for identifying city-state issues from the Archaic through Roman periods, covering mints from Magna Graecia and the Aegean to Syria and Bactria.⁵⁶

Gordian I to Gordian III (AD 238–244): All Provinces Except Asia (London: British Museum Press; Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2023); Michel Amandry and Jérôme Mairat, *Roman Provincial Coinage. Volume IX: From Trajan Decius to Uranius Antoninus (AD 249–254)* (London: British Museum Press; Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2023).

⁵⁴ Ya'akov Meshorer, *Treasury of Jewish Coins: From the Persian Period to Bar Kokhba* (New York: Amphora Books, 2001).

⁵⁵ David Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins*, 6th ed. (New York: Amphora, 2021).

⁵⁶ Supplementary corpora include the British Museum Catalogue of Greek Coins (BMC Greek), published in 28 volumes between 1873 and 1927: *Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum*, eds. Reginald Stuart Poole (RSP), Percy Gardner (PG), Barclay Vincent Head (BVH), Warwick Wroth (WW), G. F. Hill (GFH), and E. S. G. Robinson (ESGR), Volume 1. *Italy*, RSP, 1873; 2. *Sicily*, PG, BVH, RSP (1876); 3. *The Tauric Chersonese, Sarmatia, Dacia, Moesia, Thrace*, PG, BVH (1877); 4. *The Seleucid Kings of Syria*, PG (1878); 5. *Macedonia*, BVH (1879); 6. *Thessaly to Aetolia*, PG (1883); 7. *The Ptolemies*, RSP (1883); 8. *Central Greece*, BVH (1884); 9. *Crete and the Aegean Islands*, WW (1886); 10. *Peloponnesus* (excluding Corinth), PG

Hellenistic royal coinages are documented in specialised works. For example, Martin Price's catalogue⁵⁷ covers the vast posthumous coinage issued in Alexander's name across his former empire. Likewise, Arthur Houghton and Catharine Lorber produced the standard typology for Seleucid royal issues, assigning each type an 'SC' number and organizing entries by reign, mint, and denomination.⁵⁸

4.3 Other Coinage

Beyond the Graeco-Roman world, other coinages are catalogued in corpora and are of importance for understanding empire and identity in antiquity. David Sellwood arranges Parthian issues by reign and assigns each type a Sellwood number.⁵⁹ This remains the standard reference for Parthian coinage, offering a systematic typology. Parthian coinage, especially the silver drachms catalogued by Sellwood, presents an imperial visual and monetary system that stood in deliberate contrast to Roman and Hellenistic traditions. The consistent representation of Parthian kings in profile and the seated archer motif convey a conception of authority rooted in Iranian royal ideology, emphasising continuity, stability, and martial readiness. For scholars engaged in empire criticism, this distinct visual language serves as a counterpoint to Roman claims of universal rule and divine sanction. In New Testament studies, Parthian coinage contextualises the geopolitical tension in regions east of Syria and Judea, particularly during episodes like the Parthian support for rival Jewish rulers and their incursions into Roman territory. The ideological boundary between the Parthian and Roman worlds, encoded in their currencies, reflects the contested nature of imperial identity and power at the eastern frontier of Rome's influence.

Ya'akov Meshorer's volume on Nabataean Coins⁶⁰ offers a typology of Nabataean coinage from the 3rd century BCE through the annexation of the Nabataean Kingdom by Rome in 106 CE. The corpus provides invaluable evidence for under-

(1887); 11. *Attica-Megaris-Aegina*, BVH (1888); 12. *Corinth*, BVH (1889); 13. *Pontus, Paphlagonia, Bithynia, and the Kingdom of Bosporus*, WW (1889); 14. *Ionia*, BVH (1892); 15. *Of Alexandria and the nomes*, RSP (1892); 16. *Mysia*, WW (1894); 17. *Troas, Aeolis, and Lesbos*, WW (1894); 18. *Caria, Cos, Rhodes*, BVH (1897); 19. *Lycia, Pamphylia, and Pisidia*, (1897); 20. *Galatia, Cappadocia, and Syria*, WW (1898); 21. *Lycaonia, Isauria, and Cilicia*, GFH (1900); 22. *Lydia*, BVH (1901); 23. *Cyprus*, GFH (1904); 24. *Phrygia*, BVH (1906); 25. *Phoenicia*, GFH (1910); 26. *Palestine* (Galilee, Samaria, and Judea), GFH (1914); 27. *Arabia Mesopotamia, and Persia*, GFH (1922); 28. *Cyrenaica*, ESGR (1927).

⁵⁷ Martin Price, *The Coinage in the Name of Alexander and Philip Arrhidaeus* (2 vols., London: British Museum Press, 1991).

⁵⁸ Arthur Houghton, Catharine Lorber, and Oliver Hoover, *Seleucid Coins: A Comprehensive Catalogue*, 2 vols. (New York: American Numismatic Society, 2002–2008).

⁵⁹ David Sellwood, *An Introduction to the Coinage of Parthia*, 2nd ed. (London: Spink, 1980).

⁶⁰ Ya'akov Meshorer, *Nabataean Coins*. (Qedem 3. Jerusalem: Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1975).

standing a client kingdom that maintained cultural and political distinctiveness while navigating Roman expansion. The coinage of Petra and other Nabataean centres demonstrates both the assertion of royal legitimacy, often with co-regency portraits and royal titulature, and engagement with Roman numismatic styles. These coins are critical for reconstructing the visual culture and economic networks of the Nabataean Kingdom, especially in relation to trade routes, caravan cities, and temple economies. For New Testament studies, they offer a lens into the wider Semitic cultural milieu and provide parallels for the material expressions of kingship and worship in adjacent territories like Judea. The numismatic record also reflects the eventual incorporation of Nabataea into the Roman Provincia Arabia under Trajan, offering an opportunity to examine the dynamics of imperial annexation and acculturation.

Robert D. Van Arsdell⁶¹ and Elizabeth Cottam's⁶² catalogues of ancient British coinage reveal how indigenous polities used coinage to express autonomy, identity, and regional power structures in the face of Roman encroachment. The rich iconographic variety, ranging from stylised horse motifs to inscribed tribal names, illustrates a vibrant symbolic language unmoored from classical norms. These coins were not only economic tools but also badges of sovereignty and ethnic distinction. From the perspective of empire criticism, Celtic coinage exemplifies the ways local groups resisted or reinterpreted imperial ideologies, challenging the narrative of seamless Romanisation. For New Testament scholars, the British examples offer comparative material for understanding how peripheral regions responded to imperial presence and how coinage mediated social identity in a pre-Roman and transitional imperial context.

Together, these corpora form the scholarly infrastructure of ancient numismatics. Whether through the standardised numbering of RIC and RPC, the decentralised but comprehensive approach of SNG, or the dynastic typologies of Seleucid, Parthian, or Sasanian coinage, these resources enable scholars to study coinage as a medium of ideological expression, cultural negotiation, and economic interaction. For those engaged in empire criticism, the coinage catalogued in these corpora provides both tangible data and interpretive depth, illuminating how imperial power was constructed, received, contested, and remembered in the ancient world.

4.4 Other Numismatic Instruments

In addition to coinage, ancient societies employed a wide variety of other numismatic media, including tokens, tesserae, medallions, counterstamped pieces, and leaden seals. These artefacts, though not legal tender in the strict sense, played

⁶¹ Robert D. Van Arsdell, *Celtic Coinage of Britain* (London: Spink, 1989).

⁶² Elizabeth Cottam, *Ancient British Coins* (London: Spink, 2010).

important economic, social, or ceremonial roles and are increasingly recognised as essential complements to formal monetary systems.

The study of tokens and tesserae introduces a category of objects that reveal non-monetary uses of value and ideology within the imperial system. These items often circulated in social contexts, including public games, food distribution, and festivals, and that lay beyond official monetary exchange. Yet their iconography (e.g., emperors distributing grain, gods presiding over festivities) reinforced imperial benefaction and divine favour.⁶³ For empire studies, this has significant implications: it provides comparative material for understanding the Roman culture of euergetism (public generosity), a system implicitly challenged by the Christian message of almsgiving and divine provision.

Spintriae, erotic tokens whose function remains debated, offer a provocative moral insight into the control and regulation of sexuality in the early empire. Whether used in brothels, bathhouses, or gaming contexts, these tokens exemplify a parallel economy operating beneath the official monetary system.⁶⁴ Their imagery and numeration suggest state tolerance or oversight of spaces that were morally ambiguous but socially significant. For empire criticism, *spintriae* highlight how even intimate domains of life, sex, pleasure, and bodily practice were subject to symbolic ordering within imperial ideology. When set alongside New Testament teachings on sexuality, purity, and the body (e.g., 1 Corinthians 6), *spintriae* sharpen our sense of contrast between Roman moral permissiveness and Christian ethical restraint.

Imperial medallions, typically cast in large denominations and issued on special occasions, functioned as elite gifts and ceremonial artefacts. Their elaborate designs often exceed the ideological density of circulating coinage, offering heightened portrayals of imperial virtues, apotheosis scenes, military victories, and civic celebrations⁶⁵. Medallions thus serve as key artefacts for understanding how imperial presence was staged, commemorated, and circulated among the upper strata of society. In the context of New Testament studies, they illuminate the visual and symbolic competition at work in texts that proclaim Jesus as the exalted Lord or triumphant king (e.g., Philippians 2:9–11), using language and

⁶³ Clare Rowan, *Tokens and Social Life in Roman Imperial* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Antonino Crisà, Mairi Gkikaki, and Clare Rowan, *Tokens: Culture, Connections, Communities* (London: Royal Numismatic Society, 2019).

⁶⁴ A. Campana, “Le spintriae: tessere romane con raffigurazioni erotiche”, in *La donna romana. Immagini e vita quotidiana* (Cassino, Diana, 2009, 43–96); F. Benassi, N. Giordani, and C. Poggi, “Una tessera numerale con scena erotica da un contesto funerario di Mutina,” *Numismatica e antichità classiche* 32 (2003): 249–73; Theodore V. Buttrey, “The Spintriae as a Historical Source” *NumC* 13 (1973): 52–63.

⁶⁵ Jocelyn M. C. Toynbee, *Roman Medallions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944); Adrian Marsden, “Medallions of the Roman Empire: An Introduction” *Historical Medal Journal* 3 (2021): 10–28.

imagery that would have had specific resonance, and a polemical edge within the medallion-bearing world of Roman elites.

A countermarked coin is an existing coin that has been stamped again with an additional mark, symbol, inscription, or figure. This secondary mark is usually applied by a governing authority or local entity to communicate a new or updated meaning or function for the coin. Typically this could include revalidation of currency after political change or debasement; assertion of new authority or control during civil wars or regime transitions; localisation of imperial coinage by provincial cities or military units; or monetary integration across regions with varying coin standards. Howgego's landmark study reframed countermarks not merely as monetary curiosities but as tools that reveal local agency, imperial reach, and the negotiation of identity within the Roman world.⁶⁶

Taken cumulatively, these coinages and para-numismatic artefacts extend the interpretive possibilities for empire criticism. They offer access to the competing claims of sovereignty, the visual language of power, and the material manifestations of imperial ideology. Moreover, they help reconstruct the environments in which early Christian texts were written, read, and heard. These texts were not merely spiritual proclamations, but deeply political and counter-imperial assertions operating in an empire-wide 'economy of symbols' – and economy that included coins, tokens, medallions, and every stamped instrument of cultural authority. For empire criticism, such data illuminates how imperial power was constructed, received, contested, and remembered in the ancient world.

5 Case Study on Mark 1:1

Having outlined the rationale for the incorporation of numismatics (§ 1), traced the historical development of coinage (§ 2), addressed key methodological limitations (§ 3), and surveyed the principal primary source corpora and collections of numismatic and para-numismatic evidence (§ 4), we now turn to a demonstration of how numismatic material may be profitably employed as a critical tool for interpreting texts within their imperial context (§ 5). The Gospel of Mark offers a particularly fruitful test case. While its opening verses are frequently (and profitably) examined through theological and intertextual lenses,⁶⁷ they also arise from a world permeated by Roman political symbolism, much of which was communicated and mediated through coinage.

⁶⁶ Christopher Howgego, *Greek Imperial Countermarks: Studies in the Provincial Coinage of the Roman Empire* (Royal Numismatic Society Special Publication No. 10. London: Royal Numismatic Society, 1985).

⁶⁷ Rikk E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark*, WUNT II/88 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

This case study demonstrates how numismatic evidence can be employed as a critical tool for interpreting a New Testament text within its imperial context. We will seek to illuminate the ideological dimensions of Mark 1:1, particularly through the interrelated concepts of *ἀρχή* (“beginning”), *υἱός θεοῦ* (“Son of God”), and *όδὸς κυρίου* (“way of the Lord”). By placing these terms and phrases in dialogue with Roman coin types and the broader imperial discourse they helped construct, the following analysis exemplifies a methodological approach that treats coins as primary sources in the practice of empire criticism. This approach does not presume a direct causal link between coinage and text, but rather, attends to a shared symbolic vocabulary and the contested claims about time, authority, and identity negotiated within the political and cultural milieu of the first-century Roman world.

5.1 *Mark 1:1a, ἀρχή*

The conception of time in Greco-Roman antiquity served as a recurrent source of discourse and illustration for ancient philosophers, historians, poets, and grammarians. It was also frequently employed as a political tool, as noted by Richard Faure and Simon-Pierre Valli, “[r]ulers of various sorts played on the calendar and feasts, elections ... to maintain power or elicit the benevolence of citizens or subjects.”⁶⁸ Roman rulers affirmed their authority and attempted to establish their legitimacy by declaring their reigns at the beginning of a new era or *saeculum* (age). In 249 BCE, the games conducted in 348 BCE were reinterpreted as the *Ludi Saeculares*, intended to take place every 100 years (that is, a complete cycle of time or human life) at Tarentum in the Campus Martius.⁶⁹ By 149 BCE, the *Ludi Saeculares* involved elaborate celebrations to mark the end of one age and the beginning of another, to ritually renew and ensure the prosperity of the Roman state. In 49 BCE the Roman Republic underwent massive political upheaval (Pompey the Great was killed in 48 BCE; Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BCE), and only in the second civil war did one individual, Octavian (later Augustus), emerge as the ultimate victor, skilfully navigating the complex political landscape, consolidating power, and establishing himself as the first Emperor of Rome in 31 BCE. Augustus’ advisors reinterpreted the Sibylline Oracles and redefined the intervals between eras to be 110 years (hence 348, 238,

⁶⁸ Richard Faure and Simon-Pierre Valli, “Introduction: From Theoretical to Practical Time in Antiquity,” in *Conceptions of Time in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, ed. Richard Faure, Simon-Pierre Valli, Arnaud Zucker (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022), 4 (1–19). On this see further, Catherine Darbo-Peschanski, “Temporalisations: fondements, descriptions, usages,” in *Constructions du temps dans le monde grec ancien*, ed. Catherine Darbo-Peschanski (Paris, CNRS Editions, 2000), 11–27.

⁶⁹ Leofranc Holford-Strevens, “Saeculum,” in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall, Kai Brodersen, Craige B. Champion, Andrew Erskine and Sabine R. Huebner, 13 vols. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), II: 6006–6007.

128, and 18 BCE) conveniently corresponding to Augustus' return from his three-year tour of the east. The *saeculum* proclaimed the dawn of a new era of Roman peace and prosperity, and simultaneously acclaimed Augustus' rule.

Not surprisingly, Augustus minted a variety of coins to commemorate the *saeculum*. RIC I² Augustus 354 (Figure 1) was struck in 16 BCE and issued by L. Mescinius Rufus. The obverse has the Head of Augustus, bare, facing right with accompanying legend CAESAR AVGSTVS TR POT (Caesar Augustus tribunicia potestas, "Caesar Augustus with tribunician power"). The reverse depicts an inscribed cippus (rectangular pedestal, boundary marker) IMP CAES AVG LVD SAEC (Imperator Caesar Augustus, Ludi Saeculares, "Imperator Caesar Augustus secular games") with accompanying legend, L MESCINIVS RVFVS IIIVIR XV SF (Lucius Mescinius Rufus, Triumvir, Quindecimviri Sacris Faciundis, "Lucius Mescinius Rufus, moneyer [Triumvir Monetales], one of the 15 men of the sacred college").



Figure 1: RIC I² 354, ANS 1944.100.38337, public domain.

In the preceding year, RIC I² Augustus 340 (figure 2) was issued by M. Sanquinius. The obverse depicts a herald, standing, facing left, holding caduceus in his right hand, and shield with star in left, with the legend AVGST DIVI F LVDOS SAE (Augusti Divi Ludos Saeculares, "Secular games of the divine Augustus"). The reverse features a four-rayed comet with tail above a youthful head of Julius Caesar, laureate, facing right, and the identification of the moneyer (M SANQVINIVS IIIVIR, Marcus Sanquinius Triumvir, "Marcus Sanquinius, moneyer").

Claudius (41–54 CE) reverted to the pre-Augustan 100 year interval of the *saeculum*, making the 800th anniversary of the founding of Rome conveniently correspond to the start of his reign (Censorinus 17.11). If he did strike any coins commemorating this event, none have survived. Domitian however struck no



Figure 2: RIC I² 340, ANS 1948.19.1023, public domain.

fewer than 15 coin types, including gold, silver, and bronze denominations, commemorating the celebration of the *Ludi Saeculares* in 88 CE. He arrived at this date by calculating the date of the *saeculum* as approximately 110 years from Augustus' celebration in 17 BCE. This produced the "most extensive set of numismatic images concerning a single religious festival to have survived from Roman antiquity."⁷⁰ RIC II.1 Domitian 601 (figure 3) is a silver denarius struck in 88 CE. The obverse depicts the head of Domitian, laureate, facing right, with legend, IMP CAES DOMIT AVG GERM P M TR P VIII (Imperator Caesar Domitianus Augustus Germanicus Pontifex Maximus Tribvnica Potestate VIII, "Emperor Caesar Domitian Augustus Germanicus, Chief Priest, holding the power of tribune for the eighth time"). The reverse portrays a herald, holding shield and wand, standing left of column inscribed with COS XIII LVD SAEC FEC (Consul XIII Ludos Saeculares Fecit, "Consul for the fourteenth time, he celebrated the secular games"); an incense burner stands between the column and herald. In this and other issues, Domitian clearly aspires to recall Augustan iconography and strategically aligns himself with the symbolism and virtues associated with the reign of Augustus. This biographical typology seeks to portray his public image in alignment with the revered ideals of the early principate.⁷¹ None of this is to say that Domitian merely copied Augustus. In fact, Domitian's saecular games coinage introduced its own distinctive motifs, including an elaborate iconography highlighting the emperor's personal participation in the rituals.⁷²

⁷⁰ Melanie Grunow Sobociński, "Visualizing Ceremony: The Design and Audience of Saeculares Coinage of Domitian," *AJA* 110 (2006): 581 (581–602).

⁷¹ Theodore V. Buttrey, "Vespasian as Moneyer," *NumC* 7.12 (1972): 89–109.

⁷² Susan Bilynskyj Dunning, "The Transformation of the Saeculum and its Rhetoric in the Construction and Rejection of Roman Imperial Power," in *Conceptions of Time in Greek*



Figure 3: RIC II.1 Domitian 601 ANS 1944.100.42476, public domain.

In considering the opening verse of Mark’s Gospel against the backdrop of Roman imperial culture, the Greco-Roman conception of time, particularly the notion of the *saeculum*, emerges as highly significant. The Roman perception of the *saeculum*, representing an “age” or “generation,” gained political significance during the Late Republic and was intricately tied to imperial authority. Augustus’ redefinition of the *saeculum* in celebration of his own rule proclaimed Rome’s entry into a new era of prosperity, and simultaneously bestowed divine favour on the establishment of his dynasty. Within this context, the Markan proclamation of the “beginning of the gospel” takes on greater significance. The inauguration of a new era in Roman political thought, symbolized by the *saeculum*, is juxtaposed with the commencement of a transformative kingdom narrative in Mark’s Gospel.

This understanding of *ἀρχή* in light of numismatic material is further supported by documentary papyri. Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 7.1021 is a notice for the accession of Nero, referring to him as *ἀγαθὸς δαίμων δὲ τῆς οὐκουμένης [ἀρ]χὴ πάντων ἀγαθῶν* “good genius of the world, beginning of all good things.”⁷³ Mark’s opening signals not just the introduction of a novel philosophy, but the opening word implies a pivotal moment, akin to the Roman emphasis on the auspicious starting point of a reign marked by promises for a flourishing future. The resonances between the Roman conceptualization of time and Mark 1:1’s *ἀρχή* provide a rich framework for understanding the depth and nature of the gospel narrative. Thus, a Roman reader hearing *ἀρχή* in Mark 1:1 could hardly avoid

and *Roman Antiquity*, ed. Richard Faure, Simon-Pierre Valli, and Arnaud Zucker (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022), 199–230.

⁷³ Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri. Part VII* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1910), no. 1021.

the imperial connotations of a new golden age, yet here that concept is being co-opted to introduce Jesus' story, implying a new era rivalling (or even exceeding) that of Augustus.

5.2 *Mark 1:1b, νιόν θεον*

Although scholarly debate persists as to whether Julius Caesar was regarded as divine during his lifetime⁷⁴ or only posthumously,⁷⁵ the formal deification of Caesar occurred less than two years after his assassination on 15 March 44 BCE. On 1 January 42 BCE, the Roman Senate officially conferred upon him the status of *Divus Julius*, "the Divine Julius." This unprecedented act of state deification marked a pivotal moment in Roman political theology, establishing a precedent for the sacralisation of imperial power. Octavian (soon to be Augustus) was quick to exploit the theological and political capital embedded in this event. As Caesar's adopted heir, he styled himself *divi filius*, "son of the divine [Julius]," a title that not only legitimised his claim to succession but also situated him within a cosmic lineage. The invocation of divine sonship served to elevate Octavian above his political rivals, aligning his rule with divine providence and projecting a new model of charismatic, sacrosanct leadership. This ideological programme is vividly embodied in RIC I² Augustus 262, a gold aureus struck between 32 and 29 BCE. Minted at a moment of escalating conflict with Mark Antony and approaching the eventual consolidation of Octavian's power, this coin communicates its message with striking economy and visual potency. The obverse features a bareheaded portrait of Octavian facing right, notably lacking any inscription. The absence of legend draws unmediated attention to his image, suggesting a figure whose identity needs no textual clarification, asserting an almost iconic authority. The reverse reinforces this authority with dynamic martial imagery: Octavian appears mounted on a rearing horse, riding left in the style of a victorious general or imperator. Below the scene, in the exergue, the legend CAESAR DIVI F "Caesar, son of the divine [Julius]," declares the foundation of his authority. The combination of equestrian imagery and divine filiation serves to present Octavian not simply as a military leader, but as a providential agent, destined to restore order and inaugurate a new era. Struck in high-value gold, the aureus would have circulated primarily among the elite,

⁷⁴ Stefan Weinstock, *Divus Julius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Duncan Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 1987); Ittaï Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁷⁵ Kenneth Scott, "The Deification of Caesar and the Beginning of the Empire," *JRS* 44 (1954): 148–54; Christopher Pelling, "The Triumviral Period," in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed., vol. 10, ed. Alan K. Bowman, Edward Champlin, and Andrew Lintott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–69; Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

serving as a potent ideological vehicle in the spheres of political loyalty, and high-level transaction. Its imagery and text would have been recognised and interpreted by those literate in the iconographic and rhetorical grammar of Roman power. Coins such as this were not merely currency, they were instruments of cultural persuasion, material proclamations of a transformed vision of sovereignty. RIC I² Augustus 262 thus exemplifies how numismatic media could be deployed to assert a ruler's divine affiliation, martial competence, and historical inevitability, all in a single, hand-held artefact. Within the broader strategy of Augustan propaganda, the coin forms part of a coherent visual rhetoric that sacralised the principate and reimagined the Roman state in theological terms.



Figure 4: RIC I² Augustus 262, ANS 1944.100.39136, public domain.

The designation of Jesus as “Son of God” in Mark 1:1 invites consideration within its imperial context. In other words, Mark’s use of *víoū θeoū* pointedly echoes and reverses the Roman use of *divi filius*. The gospel is staking a rival claim about who truly has divine sanction to rule. In the Roman world, titles of divine sonship were not mere honorifics but political claims, employed by rulers such as Augustus to legitimise their authority through association with divinised predecessors. The title *divi filius* (“son of the divine”) was central to Augustus’ public image, conveyed repeatedly through inscriptions, monuments, and especially coinage, as a means of asserting his divinely sanctioned right to rule. Against this backdrop, Mark’s attribution of divine sonship to Jesus constitutes a pointed counter-narrative. Rather than echoing imperial ideology, the Gospel proclaims a rival claim to divine authority, one grounded not in conquest or lineage, but in the life, death, and mission of the Messiah. In this sense, Mark’s introduction is not merely introspectively theological, but politically subversive: it redefines divine sonship in terms that stand in contrast to the imperial cult, challenging the

foundational assumptions of Roman power and reorienting the locus of divine legitimacy away from Caesar and toward Christ.⁷⁶

5.3 *Mark 1:3, τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου*

Mark's pronouncement in 1:2–3 evokes the literary context of its source texts (Malachi 3:1; Exodus 23:20; Isaiah 40:3) replete with its own set of metaphors and typological fulfilments.⁷⁷ To a Roman audience it would also resonate with a critique of the contemporaneous ideology of the Roman road system and the reality of empire expansion. Mark portrays the arrival of the coming Lord (κύριος, 1:3) through undulating terrain as analogous with “the engineering feats of raising ravines, levelling heights, smoothing terrain and making straight highways,”⁷⁸ all of which recall the Roman program of ever-increasing enforcement of Roman rule. In so doing, Mark simultaneously subverts Rome's pretensions with a superior coming road and kingdom (cf. Mk 1:15). Edward P. Meadors uses “parody” to describe this inversion,⁷⁹ and draws on S. Dentith's definition as “any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice.”⁸⁰

RIC I² Augustus 362 (figure 5) is a silver Denarius of Augustus issued by L. Vinicius in 16 BCE. The obverse has SPQR IMP CAES inscribed on a pedestal of an equestrian statue of Augustus riding right with a gate of the city in the background. The reverse depicts a cippus (milestone or boundary post) inscribed with a six line inscription, SPQR IMP CAE QVOD V M S EX EA P Q IS AD A DE (Senatus Populusque Romanus, Imperatori Caesari, quod viae munitae sunt ex ea pecunia quam is ad aerarium detulit, trans “the Senate and Roman People to Caesar because the roads have been paved out of the money which he contributed to the treasury”).

This coin reinforces the connection between Roman roads and imperial rule. This coin serves as a tangible representation of Augustus's contributions to the improvement and administration of public roads, and it was designed to promote a quintessential feature of Roman expansion: roads and rule. The inclusion of a statue on the coin, possibly one erected to Augustus by the Senate near the Porta Flaminia, adds another layer to the numismatic narrative. It signifies a visual connection between the ruler's contributions to the empire's infrastructure and the symbolism of his authority. This coin, and the broader ideology of road-

⁷⁶ See further G. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (1922; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 295.

⁷⁷ Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

⁷⁸ Edward P. Meadors, “Isaiah 40.3 and the Synoptic Gospels' Parody of the Roman Road System,” *NTS* 66 (2019): 106.

⁷⁹ Meadors, “Isaiah,” 106–24.

⁸⁰ S. Dentith, *Parody* (London: Routledge, 2009), 9.



Figure 5: RIC 1² Augustus 362, ANS 1944.100.38335, public domain.

building and imperial beneficence it epitomises, provides a helpful interpretive lens for Mark's critique.

The undulating terrain through which the coming Lord is portrayed is not only likened to the engineering marvels of Roman road construction, raising ravines, levelling heights, smoothing terrain, but also serves as a substantive subversive critique of the contemporary Roman ideology regarding road systems and imperial expansion. Mark's claim is that the Lord's way, with its divine engineering, surpasses the achievements, past and future of Roman roads and rule.

This case study has sought to demonstrate how numismatic evidence can serve as a critical lens through which to explore the imperial context of early Christian texts. By attending to the shared symbolic and ideological vocabulary of the first-century Roman world, particularly as expressed through coinage, the opening of Mark's Gospel emerges not only as a theological declaration but as a text alive to, and engaged with, the material expressions of imperial authority. The terms ἀρχή, νιοῦ θεοῦ, and ὁδὸς κυρίου, when read against the foreground of Roman political iconography, signal Mark's participation in a broader contest of claims about time, power, and legitimacy. In this way, numismatics does not merely supplement our reading of this verse; it is in itself a crucial tool for empire criticism, illuminating how coins and Gospels alike inscribed meaning into the public imagination of the ancient world.

6 Counternarratives in Coinage

Numismatic evidence reveals that coinage was not only a tool of Roman hegemony, but also a medium through which dissenting groups articulated resis-

tance, expressed ideological alternatives, and reasserted cultural identity. Coins circulated broadly, reached diverse audiences, and were embedded with layered visual and textual messages. This ubiquity enabled them to function as a portable script, both a state-sanctioned broadcast and, at times, a subversive counter narrative. Various groups under Roman rule (Jewish insurgents, Hellenistic dynasts, and Gallic tribes) utilised coinage to nuance, redefine or reject Roman authority. These coinages were often issued during periods of crisis or transition, adopted local scripts, iconography, and legends to contest imperial narratives and legitimise alternative claims to power.

*Hendin 638*⁸¹ is a silver shekel struck in Jerusalem in Year 1 of the First Jewish Revolt (May 66 – March 67 CE). This coin represents one of the clearest numismatic rejections of both Roman imperial and foreign authority. The obverse features a ritual chalice with a smooth wide rim surrounded by the paleo-Hebrew inscription שֶׁקֶל יִשְׂרָאֵל (Shekel of Israel), with the date “Year 1” above. The reverse depicts three pomegranates, an image rooted in priestly and Temple symbolism (Exod 28:33; 2 Chron 4:13), accompanied by the inscription יְרוּשָׁלָם הַקָּדָשָׁה (Jerusalem the Holy).

Ancient coins typically did not display their denominations, since a coin’s value was understood from its metal, size, and weight (and could vary with wear, locale, or age). Including the term ‘shekel of Israel’ was thus not simply labelling a value; it made a symbolic political statement. The revolt’s minters were branding these as distinctly Israelite coins in contrast to the Tyrian shekels traditionally used in Temple transactions, which themselves had a Greek inscription ΤΥΡΟΥ ΙΕΡΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΑΣΥΛΟΥ “of holy Tyre, [city] of asylum.” By issuing coins labelled with “shekel of Israel” and “holy Jerusalem,” the revolt minters were asserting national-religious independence and replacing foreign currency in sacred contexts with genuinely Hebrew coinage, a theological and political act.⁸² Furthermore, by reviving archaic scripts and rejecting Latin and Greek inscriptions, this coin constructed a theocratic counter-narrative. Rather than expressing loyalty to the emperor, the imagery and language centre sacred geography and covenantal identity, effectively challenging Roman religious and political claims to legitimacy in Judea.

In 88–63 BCE Mithradates VI of Pontus minted a silver tetradrachm (*de Callataj D112*)⁸³ which was part of a broader Hellenistic effort aimed at resisting Roman imperialism. The obverse bears a diademed portrait of Mithradates, modelled after the heroic image of Alexander the Great. The reverse features Dionysus seated, holding a thyrsus and cup, with the Greek legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΜΙΘΡΑΔΑΤΟΥ ΕΥΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ (Of King Mithradates the Noble Father). The

⁸¹ Hendin, *Guide*, 318.

⁸² Meshorer, *Treasury*, 116.

⁸³ *de Callataj, L'histoire*.

use of Greek deities and Hellenistic iconography positioned Mithradates as the protector of Greek civilisation against Roman aggression. By appropriating Alexander's visual legacy, the coins cast Mithradates as a new liberator of the East, offering a cultural and political alternative to Roman rule.

The Roman practice of *damnatio memoriae*, the formal erasure of a disgraced individual's memory, found expression not only in the removal of names from inscriptions and the defacement of statues, but also in the manipulation of coinage. After his death in 68 CE, Emperor Nero became a notable target of this posthumous condemnation. One clear example is a *RIC I* 543, bronze as minted at Lugdunum around 65 CE, originally bearing the laureate portrait of Nero with the legend NERO CAVDIVS CAESAR AVG P MAX TR PPP. Following his downfall, this coin was countermarked with the letters SPQR (Senatus Populusque Romanus) across his neck: an act of visual repudiation that reasserted the authority of the Senate and People of Rome while symbolically nullifying Nero's imperial legitimacy. In other cases, coins of Nero were countermarked with the name of his successor Galba. The act literally overlaying Nero's portrait with Galba's name – a new emblem of power. These countermarks not only functioned as tools of political propaganda but also as tactile enactments of historical revisionism, illustrating how Roman coinage could serve as a medium for both memory and its deliberate erasure.

*SC 2061*⁸⁴ is a Seleucid Tetradrachm of Antiochus VII Sidetes issued in 138–129 BCE. It subtly proclaims his Hellenic allegiance in opposition to Roman ascendancy. The obverse shows the head of Antiochus wearing a royal diadem. The reverse features Athena standing left, holding Nike and a shield, with the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΥ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ (Of King Antiochus, the Benefactor, Lover of Greeks). The term "Philhellen" signals a deliberate alignment with Greek values and political autonomy. Issued in a period of rising Roman pressure in the Eastern Mediterranean, this coin affirms Seleucid sovereignty as part of a broader ideological struggle over the future of the Hellenistic world.

RRC 508/3 was struck by Marcus Junius Brutus in 42 BCE and is among the most politically charged coins of antiquity. The obverse features a bare-headed portrait of Brutus with the inscription BRVT IMP L PLAET CEST, identifying him as imperator and naming his moneyer, Lucius Plaetorius Cestianus. This marked a dramatic break with Republican norms, which traditionally avoided depicting living persons on coinage. The reverse bears a pileus (cap of liberty) flanked by two daggers, with the stark inscription EID MAR, a reference to the Ides of March, the date of Caesar's assassination. The imagery declares that Caesar's death brought freedom to the Republic, casting the conspirators as liberators. It is the only known Roman coin to openly celebrate a political assas-

⁸⁴ Houghton, Lorber, and Hoover, *Seleucid Coins*, no. 2061.

sination. This coin transformed currency into a manifesto. Its symbolism: portrait, weapons, liberty cap, and historical date, proclaimed Republican ideology through a medium otherwise dominated by imperial narratives. As such, the EID MAR denarius stands as a rare and bold act of resistance, encapsulating the politics of tyrannicide in a piece of silver propaganda.

These diverse coinages (revolts, overstrikes, and countermarks) collectively demonstrate that ancient coinage was far from a monologue of imperial power. Instead, it constituted a multilayered dialogue in metal, inscribed with competing visions of authority, identity, and legitimacy. Coins were tactile tools of propaganda, but also potential vehicles of protest. Numismatics enables us to access the curated self-presentation of rulers and the responsive self-definition of local communities. In contexts of empire, coinage functioned not simply as currency but as a site of cultural negotiation, a battlefield and broadcast medium in the ideological struggles of antiquity.

7 Conclusion

In summary, this study has sought to demonstrate that ancient coinage, often relegated to numismatic specialists, offers vital insights into the historical, social, and political life of the ancient world. Far from being merely economic instruments, coins functioned as strategic tools of communication, broadcasting messages of power, identity, legitimacy, and belief across diverse regions and communities. By tracing the development of coinage from its earliest origins in Lydia through to its imperial deployment in Rome, and by engaging critically with its imagery, inscriptions, and contexts of circulation, this study demonstrates how numismatics can serve as a valuable lens for interpreting the ideological structures of antiquity. In particular, the case study on Mark 1:1 sought to illustrate how numismatic materials may enrich our understanding of early Christian texts when situated within the symbolic world of Roman imperial discourse. At the same time, this study has acknowledged the methodological limitations inherent in numismatic research, its elite origins, uneven preservation, and partial perspectives. Yet, it is precisely through these limitations that coins provide a glimpse into how rulers wished to be perceived, how communities aligned themselves within broader imperial frameworks, and how certain groups resisted or reimagined power through counter-narratives expressed in coinage. These observations offer not just data for historical reconstruction, but a dynamic lexical and iconographic archive of meaning, one that helps illuminate how authority was visualised, negotiated, and contested in the ancient world. By placing coins alongside texts, we can better understand the ways in which empire was both enacted and challenged in everyday life.

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Iconography

Imperial Imagery and New Testament Depiction

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Early Christianity developed in a world filled with images. In a social context where less than ten percent of the population was able to read or write, the residents of the Roman Empire negotiated their lives with the help of visual representations. As Tonio Hölscher Roman classicist and theoretician of ancient visual culture notes, “The ancient Greeks and Romans lived with images perhaps more than any other societies in world history.”¹ As such they needed visual literacy, a concept used in modern education theory to describe “a set of abilities that enables an individual effectively to find, interpret, evaluate, use and create images and visual media.”² This essay describes a central component of visual literacy amongst promoters of Christ religion in the first century, namely their ability to engage with and appropriate elements of imperial visual culture to create ways of imagining the god they worshiped and the ideals they promoted. The imperial visual culture this essay engages is that associated with the emperor and the vocabulary, rituals, and institutions of imperial rule. Ubiquitous depictions that advertised the achievements of imperial rule and promoted its ideals were a central resource for early Christians to understand, portray, and communicate their claims, as well as to shape their responses to Roman imperial realities. This is in part because the imperial world the New Testament authors wrote in and communicated their ideals to their audiences was a world whose rulers were aware of the importance and dissemination of visual media and increasingly exploited them to advertise those rulers’ identity, achievements, and aims. Augustus inaugurated a programme attentive to spreading such representation in Rome, Italy, and the Mediterranean Basin.³ That programme was increasingly systematized in the Julio-Claudian period and especially during the Flavian dynasty as well as the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian that followed – coincidentally the

¹ Tonio Hölscher, *Visual Power in Ancient Greece and Rome: Between Art and Social Reality*, Sather Classical Lectures 73 (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 254.

² “The Framework of Visual Literacy in Higher Education,” https://www.ala.org/acrl/Association-of-College-and-Research-Libraries/April-6-2022/www.ala.org/sites/default/files/acrl/content/standards/Framework_Companion_Visual_Literacy.pdf, 2.

³ For discussion, Paul Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*, 5th ed. (Munich: Beck, 2009); ET: *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, Jerome Lectures 16, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988).

same period when most of the New Testament was composed.⁴ The Flavians gave close attention to coinage as a means of propagating the images and benefits of their imperial rule, as rulers gave a great deal of attention to their depiction across the Roman Empire.⁵ As the other essays in this volume indicate, numismatic images, inscriptions, and monuments were important means by which imperial rulers represented themselves as the rightful rulers of the Mediterranean Basin. A constant in these media was universal acclamation of a transethnic and trans-geographical set of achievements. When New Testament authors sought to give expression to their own universal statements, a visual literacy with these media images and vocabulary proved especially useful. Their use was also to have far reaching effects. When Christianity emerged as a dominant religion of the Roman Empire and finally adopted by emperors, rulers found in the New Testament's uses of imperial imagery a ready way to express their political ambitions and to celebrate their achievements as part of an imperial Christian order.⁶ This was sometimes ironic, since several New Testament appropriations of imperial themes and iconography drew on those motifs to redirect them away from a politics of domination toward one of solidarity and self-sacrifice.⁷

The following discussion argues that attention to the influence of imperial iconography on the contents of some of the New Testament furnishes important insights for recognizing the ways in which their authors were embedded within, appropriated, and advanced or opposed the imperial ideals communicated with such imagery. At the same time, it invites caution in determining the influence of imperial ideas and images on the composition of New Testament

⁴ Niels Hannestad, *Roman Art and Imperial Policy*, trans, P.J. Crabb (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1988) charts the development and systematization. This essay assumes that the uncontested Pauline writings were written during the Julio-Claudian period and that the contested letters (Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Thessalonians) together with the rest of the writings of the New Testament were written from the Flavian period onward. However, even on another dating, the importance of attention to iconography remains.

⁵ For a discussion of Flavian and then Trajanic exploitation of coinage, Jan Eric Blamberg, "The Public Image Projected by Roman Emperors (A.D. 69–117) as Reflected in Contemporary Imperial Coinage," Ph. D. Diss., Indiana University (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1976); Ian Carradice, "Flavian Coinage," in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage*, ed. William E. Metcalf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 375–90; for Hadrianic coinage, Marin Beckmann, "Trajan and Hadrian," in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage*, ed. William E. Metcalf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 405–22.

⁶ For a nuanced account, Lee M. Jefferson and Robin M. Jensen, eds., *The Art of Empire: Christian Art in Its Imperial Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015). For links between biblical exegesis and imperial imagery and propaganda from Constantine onward, Jeffrey Spier, "The Earliest Christian Art: From Personal Salvation to Imperial Power," in *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, ed. Jeffrey Spier (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 1–24.

⁷ For a discussion of New Testament appropriations of imperial art and the influence of biblical appropriation of imperial motifs in the promotion of imperial power by Christian emperors, Harry O. Maier, *Picturing Paul in Empire: Imperial Image, Text, and Persuasion in Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastorals Epistles* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

canonical writing. After offering a general account of the role of the visual in the persuasive strategies of New Testament writings as it relates specifically to imperial depictions, it introduces three representative scholarly views that explore the place of imperial imagery in shaping New Testament texts and hypothesizing from them attitudes toward the Empire they evoked. The essay concludes by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of such approaches and what directions they might invite future scholarship to explore.

1 Empire Criticism: For or Against Empire; Empire at All?

Although attention to Roman imperial depiction briefly played an important role in scholarship over a century ago, sustained attention to visual culture in general and discussion of imperial imagery in particular in shaping New Testament Christianity has been a relative latecomer to contemporary New Testament study. This may be due to the influence of a Protestant theological commitment formulated during the Reformation to interpret the Bible with the Bible. A further contributing component, closely related to that hermeneutical commitment as well as an outcome of the use of the printing press and the way it shaped engagement with the Bible especially from the Reformation onward, may be an orientation to Scripture as a repository of saving doctrines and the printed text as a divinely inspired resource for theologically educated readers. Today, while the theological commitments may be left behind or suspended in biblical study, the legacy of that orientation may be detected in the way training in biblical studies centres on the development of expertise in syntactical, philological, and textual analysis. One can be misled in concluding from this orientation that the original audiences of New Testament texts were similarly oriented to such skills. The ancient world, however, was an oral/aural culture and texts were written as much to create an impact on audiences as they were to communicate carefully formulated abstract concepts designed for close reading by sophisticated readers.⁸ Accordingly, the discipline of New Testament studies has been enhanced by exegesis attentive to

⁸ For an account of the difference between oral/aural or preliterate and written or literate culture and the role of printed texts in shaping experience and knowledge of the world, see Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 11–15. Later in his study (31–36) he lists characteristics of oral culture and the means of communication. Assessing impact is also a chief interest of socio-rhetorical criticism, a method of studying biblical texts pioneered by Vernon K. Robbins in *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996). The approach concentrates on the ways biblical writers sought to persuade their audiences by tailoring their communication to create certain effects on their audiences. Robbins' model of socio-rhetorical interpretation has been deployed to great effect by Rosemary Canavan, *Clothing the Body of Christ at Colossae: A Visual Construction of Identity*, WUNT II/334 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), a study explored in fuller detail below.

the rhetorical dimensions of biblical texts. Research into the visual components of biblical texts or the visual more generally as a means of their interpretation is at an early stage of development.⁹ But it is safe to say that without attending to ways in which writing was influenced by surrounding visual culture, traditional exegesis will be blind to one of the most important cultural influences that helped shape early Christianity. Orality and visuality work hand in hand in new currents of biblical study. Empire criticism, that is the study of the ways New Testament authors were shaped by and responded to imperial phenomena that surrounded them, is enhanced by attention to the oral dimensions of texts as well as the lived experience of the Roman Empire through visual culture. Reading the Bible with a view to its visual cues helps to recognize one of the ways New Testament audiences were affected by the empire that surrounded them.

It is by no means a foregone conclusion that visual imperial culture was a determining factor in shaping the contents of the New Testament. Investigations with this focus have largely been undertaken by Anglo-American scholars.¹⁰ There has been a wide range of scholarly positions regarding the influence of imperial realities on the contents of the New Testament.¹¹ Some argue that its authors ac-

⁹ An early pioneering set of essays is published in Annette Weissenrieder, Fredericke Wendt, and Petra von Gemünden, eds., *Picturing the New Testament: Studies in Ancient Visual Images*, WUNT II/193 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), where an introduction introduces a series of methods some of which the subsequent essays take up. David L. Balch, *Roman Domestic Art and Early House Churches*, WUNT 228 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) is representative of several studies where Balch explores the influences of imperial ideology on villa frescoes in Pompeii and how they might invite us to interpret a selection of New Testament and Early Christian texts. Marlis Arnold, Harry O. Maier, and Jörg Rüpke, eds., *Seeing the God: Image, Space, Performance, and Vision in the Religion of the Roman Empire*, Culture, Religion, and Politics in the Roman World 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), explores visual exegesis of several New Testament and early Christian texts. The “visual turn” and the role of the visual in persuasion has been theorized well in Vernon K. Robbins’ account of “rhetography,” a concept that explores the role of the generation of images or graphic images in the minds of listeners as a means of persuasion; Vernon K. Robbins, “Rhetography: A New Way of Seeing the Familiar Text,” in *Words Well Spoken: George Kennedy’s Rhetoric of the New Testament*, ed. C. Clifton Black and Duane F. Watson (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 81–106; for representative essays that engage visual exegesis including with reference to imperial realities, see Vernon K. Robbins, Walter S. Mellon, and Roy R. Jeal, eds., *The Art of Visual Exegesis: Rhetoric, Texts, Images*, Emory Studies in Early Christianity (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017).

¹⁰ There is a notable absence amongst German scholars of engagement with the New Testament using empire criticism; a notable exception is Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana. Anspruch und Wirklichkeit. Erfahrungen und Wahrnehmungen des Friedens* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1986); ET *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1987); for a survey of further studies, Christian Strecker, “Taktiken der Aneignung: Politische Implikationen der paulinischen Botschaft im Kontext der römischen imperialen Wirklichkeit,” in *Das Neue Testament und politische Theorie: Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur Zukunft des Politischen*, ed. Eckhart Reinmuth, Religionskulturen 9 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011), 114–48.

¹¹ For a survey of positions in Pauline scholarship, Christoph Heilig, *Hidden Criticism: The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul*, WUNT II/392 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015); for essays that encapsulate different positions, Scot McKnight

tively opposed the Roman Empire and that their writings are best interpreted as anti-imperial. With reference to the influence of imperial ideology, this has often been a subtext of New Testament exegesis at least since the discovery in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century of parallels of New Testament content with imperial ideology and imagery.¹² Others contend that while canonical and extra-canonical authors did not actively oppose it, the logical consequence of their ideas resulted in a stance critical of various aspects of the Roman Empire.¹³ Attention to the wider Roman Empire has led still other scholars to argue that New Testament authors were at best unconscious of and at worst complicit in the promotion of imperial ideals by substituting Jesus for the emperor and thereby generating a religion that endorsed imperial goals and ideals but in a way specific to its own narratives and structures of belief.¹⁴ Another view is that while it is customary to interpret emergent Christianity in opposition to the Roman Empire, attention to imperial ideas and images leads to the conclusion that some writers actively drew on those phenomena to promote a Christ religion that actively promoted imperial ideals.¹⁵ Some other scholars argue that exegetes have overplayed their hand in detecting opposition to the Roman Empire in the New Tes-

and Joseph B. Modica, eds, *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013).

¹² For example, G. Adolf Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten: Das Neue Testament und die neu-entdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt*, 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1923); ET, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1927). Deissman described New Testament depictions of Jesus and early Christianity using imperial terms as “polemical parallelism” (346); Adolf Harnack, “Als die Zeit erfüllt war,” in *Reden und Aufsätze*, ed. Adolf Harnack, 2nd ed. (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1906), 301–6; Adolf Harnack, “Der Heiland,” in *Reden und Aufsätze*, ed. Adolf Harnack, 2nd ed. (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1906), 307–11; Ethelbert Stauffer, *Christus und die Kaisaren* (Hamburg: Wittig, 1948). A modern example of this point of view may be seen in N. T. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation. Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl*, ed., Richard Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International Press, 2000), 160–83; also, N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 1: 279–347.

¹³ For example, John M. G. Barclay, “Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul,” in *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews: Studies in the Social Formation of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 363–88, and “Paul, Roman, Religion, and the Emperor: Mapping the Point of Conflict,” *Pauline Churches*, 345–62. Barclay, however, does not centre his analysis on uses of imperial imagery in New Testament writings, an analysis which would probably lead him to a more nuanced set of conclusions.

¹⁴ For example, Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 97–121, where he argues that John so thoroughly appropriates the imagery of the Roman empire in his depiction of Christ that Christ/God becomes Caesar (106–18).

¹⁵ For example, Mary R. D’Angelo in “Εὐσέβεια: Roman Imperial Family Values and the Sexual Politics of 4 Maccabees and the Pastorals,” *BibInt* 11 (2003): 139–65 argues that virtues enjoined upon women in the Pastorals are so consonant with family virtues promoted in Roman imperial writings and imagery to make it virtually indistinguishable from Roman ideology. T. Christopher Hoklotubbe, *Civilized Piety: The Rhetoric of Pietas in the Pastoral Epistles and the*

tament, discovering anti-imperial sentiments that are simply not there.¹⁶ While few scholars would argue that the Roman Empire had no influence over the New Testament, judging by the absence of any reference to the imperial context in much scholarship, a large body of scholars do not consider it a salient enough variable to observe any specific effect upon it.¹⁷

The thesis of this essay is that Roman imperial iconography had an important influence on the way New Testament authors imagined and communicated their ideals and teachings. They did not do so in the same way or to the same degree, and in some writings (for example, the Book of Revelation) it was more thoroughgoing or direct than in others (for example, the Gospel of John).¹⁸ It is not possible from the range of the influences of imperial depiction on New Testament writings to draw a single conclusion regarding its impact on Christ religion or the response of Christ followers to the Roman Empire. A variety of scholarly positions signals that a diversity of arguments is possible and that there is not a single point of view that universally applies to every instance of Christianity promoted in the New Testament. Evidence of imperial ideas contained within New Testament depictions must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Nor, as we will see at the end of this essay, is it possible, once an influence is discerned, to draw singular conclusions regarding an imperial impact since the audiences who received and were shaped by New Testament writings were not homogenous.¹⁹ These considerations make analysis about attitudes toward the Roman Empire complicated. They also make it far more interesting, since

Roman Empire (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2017), a study with greater attention to imperial iconography, comes to similar conclusions.

¹⁶ For example, Laura Robinson, "Hidden Transcripts? The Supposedly Self-Censoring Paul and Rome as Surveillance State in Modern Pauline Scholarship," *NTS* 67 (2021): 55–72, who argues that hermeneutical tools of empire criticism applied to Paul have resulted in circular arguments.

¹⁷ An extreme example of this can be seen in the treatment of the Book of Revelation, arguably the text of the New Testament most engaged with the Roman Empire and shaped by it, by Iain Provan, "Jerusalem, Babylon and Rome: A Tale of Three Cities and More," in *Who is Sitting on Which Beast: Interpretive Issues in the Book of Revelation. Proceedings of the International Conference held at Loyola University, Chicago, March 30–31, 2017*, *Judaïsme ancien et origines du christianisme* 29, ed. Edmundo F. Lupieri and Louis Painchaud (Turnhout: Brepols, 2024), 129–42.

¹⁸ However, scholars have also detected responses to the Roman Empire in John's Gospel: for example, Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008); Lance Byron Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, CBQMS (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2023); Richard J. Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective: Christology and the Realities of Roman Power* (New York: Orbis, 1992), especially 80–82 where he speculates on John's consciousness of the Roman Empire and the degree to which the contents of his Gospel were shaped by engagement with it.

¹⁹ Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement in Early Christian Discourse*, Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World (London: Routledge, 2017), demonstrates the importance of such intersectional analysis when dealing with social realia and their meanings in New Testament studies.

they invite us to think more deeply about the place of Christ religion as a lived ancient religion practised within the complex social worlds that constituted the Roman Empire.

Notwithstanding whatever differing effects they had on audiences, there are passages that show that Roman imperial depictions were drawn upon to illustrate central ideas New Testament authors sought to communicate. Their deployment helped to give force to depictions and exert a persuasive (albeit differentiated) impact on audiences. This can be seen for example, where Jesus' death is likened to a Roman triumph (Col 2:15), where Paul pictures himself in such a triumph but as God's rather than an emperor's captive (2 Cor 2:14), where Christ's return is likened to a civic ceremony in which local officials go out to meet and accompany a ruler into the city (1 Thess 4:17), and where the gospel (a term with imperial valances) is celebrated through its reach as absorbing barbarians into the Christ cult (Col 3:11b).²⁰ In other cases, the ideals outlined by New Testament writers and depicted with vivid description can be seen to parallel achievements promoted by Roman imperial images. Such for example is the case with the angels who acclaim Christ's birth to the shepherds of Lk 2:14, where the language of peace echoes the imperial achievements of emperors in bringing peace to the Empire.²¹ In still other instances, as for example in the Book of Revelation, there is a direct assault on ideas communicated in imperial depictions and even an imitation of them to subvert Roman ideals. This can be seen for example in John's depiction of the heavenly throne room of Rev 4–5 where language, images, and anthems of praise used to celebrate the emperor's rule are applied to God and the slain lamb (Rev 5:6–13).²² The main point is that even if one is convinced of the importance of attending to imperial politics in shaping the contents of New Testament writings, one cannot speak, when referring to its depictions, of the Christ religion found in the canon as simplistically either "for" or "against" the Roman Empire. Emergent Christianity was a hybrid religion whose identity and whose socially diverse constituents were shaped by many forces including ancient Judaism, Greek and Roman philosophy, economic and demographic realities, different models of association, and so on. Imperial depiction was another element that shaped its hybrid nature. Postcolonial biblical criticism has proven a valuable tool for interpreting the different ways early Christian authors in-

²⁰ For discussion with literature, Maier, *Picturing Paul*, 54, 67–71; for a detailed discussion of 2 Cor 2:14 Christoph Heilig, *Paul's Triumph: Reassessing 2 Corinthians 2:14 in Its Literary and Historical Context*, BTS 27 (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), where he links Paul's description in 2 Cor as an ironic juxtaposition with the triumph of Claudius in 44 and in 51.

²¹ Richard A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 61–80.

²² David E. Aune, "The Influence of Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John," *Papers of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research* 28 (1985): 5–26 offers a list of parallels that shows the influence of the language, ritual, and imagery dedicated to the worship of the emperor on the contents of Rev 4–5 amongst other passages.

flected imperial iconography and deployed ideas communicated through imperial images to depict their own teachings and ideals.²³

2 Imagery, Depiction, Persuasion, and Lived Religion

There were many kinds of images that helped shape the contents of the New Testament.²⁴ Amongst them were visual depictions drawn from Hebrew Bible and intertestamental Jewish writings and concepts that New Testament authors also appropriated to convey their teachings and to promote their ideals. Other images were drawn from life experiences related to work (Mt 7:24–27; Mk 1:19; Lk 5:2–6; 9:62; 14:10; 1 Cor 3:10; 1 Thess 2:9), games (1 Cor 9:4; 9:24–27; 2 Tim 4:7; Heb 12:1), dress (Eph 4:22–23; 6:11; Col 3:12,14; 1 Tim 2:9; 1 Pet 5:5; James 2:2–3; Rev 3:18; 17:4), household life (Mt 24:45 par; Lk 15:8–9; 2 Tim 2:20; 3:4–5), and religious cultic practices (Lk 21:1–3; 2 Cor 2:14–16; Eph 5:2; Phil 2:17; 4:18; Rev 5:8; 8:3), to name only a few categories with some representative texts. Other passages include vivid images to represent imperial realities. Revelation 18:12–18, for example, echoing Ezekiel’s prophetic denunciations of trade in luxuries by Tyre (Ezek 27:1–36), includes a list of luxury goods shipped across the Mediterranean to Rome. It is no accident that John’s depiction of the heavenly Jerusalem also comprises a list of luxury items that make up its construction (Rev 21:9–21), outdoing the decoration of imperial cities and their temples. John contrasts the luxurious goods headed to Rome with those built into the heavenly Jerusalem in order to draw a sharp contrast between the two cities. In addition to this imagery, imperial iconography was an important resource in the composition as well as reception of canonical writings. Their authors assumed – even as creators of modern media do – a set of shared experiences and cultural expectations that made communication and understanding possible. Imperial realities helped to shape those experiences and expectations. However conscious or unconscious of the influence of those realities on their writings, the

²³ Sharon Jacob, “Empire, Postcolonial Criticism, and Biblical Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 735–50 where the terms mimicry and ambivalence are discussed as central categories in assessing the influence of and response to imperial realities in biblical texts, with reference to representative scholarly treatments of biblical texts.

²⁴ The term “author” is used here in a broad sense and should also be understood with the help of empire criticism. Authors of ancient texts typically included not only the person to whom the work was attributed, but also a host of others that included scribes who typically were often enslaved. This means that the production and copying of the texts that would come to comprise the New Testament took place within an imperial matrix that included slavery, economics, travel, social networks, patronage, and so on. For scribal practices and slavery, Candida R. Moss, *God’s Ghost Writers: Enslaved Christians and the Making of the Bible* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 2024).

persuasive strategies of early Christian writers depended on those shared realities. In their appropriation of those images for their own purposes, early Christ religion manifested itself as a lived everyday religion, that is a religion not orchestrated from the top down, but emerging from the bottom up, through everyday practices, rituals, morals, and so on.²⁵ Included in the practice and expression of lived religion amongst audiences consuming New Testament writings was what they saw around them every day. In the case of imperial iconography, this is especially true for those living in urban contexts, which is significant because most New Testament writings as well as extracanonical ones originated in and addressed audiences living in cities or were shaped by realities issuing forth from urban centres.²⁶ In the cities and towns of the Roman Empire, specifically in the ones where we know Christ groups gathered, seeing imperial iconography was a daily experience that ranged from the coinage one used, to the statuary found in imperial buildings, to graphic media where people gathered such at baths, *tabernae* and *coponae*, arenas and games, processions, civic festivals, and the like. Attention to the role of depiction in creating Christ religion and its relation to imperial culture helps to understand early Christianity as a religion lived in everyday contexts, far removed from the elites who governed society and who orchestrated iconographical programmes and its coded meanings that were designed to herald imperial ideals and achievements. The ways imperial rulers and its agents communicated its ideals to its subjects via visual media is important for imperial criticism of the New Testament because canonical and other early Christian authors drew on a repertoire of imperial images to communicate their beliefs, practices, and hopes. Once we understand what imperial iconography sought to communicate, we can see ways in which imitation both imitated and transformed that communication for new purposes specific to the conduct, definition, and self-understanding of early Christ followers.

What do we mean by depiction? Depiction refers to the visual representation of persons, places, things, and topics. Attention to depiction as it relates to the Roman Empire explores the ways early Christian authors drew on imperial images to communicate with their audiences. As one of the chief tasks of these writers was to persuade their audiences of their ideas, they deployed a variety of means to convince them of those notions. A critical component of persuasion

²⁵ The essay assumes the lived religion approach to the study of ancient religion developed by Jörg Rüpke, *On Roman Religion: Lived Religion and the Individual in Ancient Rome*, The Townsend Lectures / Cornell Studies in Classical Philology (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016); also, Meredith B. McGuire *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁶ For a groundbreaking account, Emiliano R. Urciuoli, *Citifying Jesus: The Making of an Urban Religion in the Roman Empire*, WUNT 520 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2024) whose study extends beyond the New Testament to examine the influence of urban realities on Christ religion across several centuries.

that was taught in elementary handbooks of instruction of rhetoric in the period when the New Testament was being composed was called “*ekphrasis*.” The term describes the use of detailed description to create images in the minds of listeners in the task of persuasion. Ancient rhetoricians theorized the nature and deployment of description in rhetorical practice.²⁷ Aristotle describes *ekphrasis* as a form of speech that turns listeners into viewers.²⁸ In one of the handbooks for the training of students learning the art of persuasion, the first century CE *Progymnasmata*, Aelius Theon (mid to late first century CE) defines *ekphrasis* as “descriptive language bringing what is portrayed clearly before the sight.”²⁹ He states that such description can be applied to a variety of topics such as people, events, places, and periods of time.³⁰ His point is that depiction can be deployed on any notion that speakers wish to convince their audiences about. Associated with *ekphrasis* is *enargeia* or vividness, namely a quality of speech that appeals to the listener’s sense of sight. The goal of vivid speech is to place audiences before the topic being described. Quintilian (c. 35–c. 100 CE) another instructor in rhetoric theorizes the role of *enargeia* in enabling listeners to see what is being declaimed. Vivid speech is used to “to express our subject clearly and in such a way that it seems actually seen.”³¹ Further, according to Quintilian, *enargeia* prompts listeners to fill in details not expressly depicted. Its use prompts a listener “even to imagine for oneself some of those things that are not even mentioned.”³² An important skill in persuasion was to move listeners to experience certain emotions. The generation of emotions, Quintilian taught, comes about through the creation of mental images (*phantasiae*) in the minds of the audience.³³ Prompting a mental picture of an image through speech evokes feelings in listeners that are linked to that image.³⁴ Through such prompting and triggering of feelings amongst their listeners, rhetors aimed to promote an audience’s participation in declaimed upon topics. We can easily imagine how this works by considering the way a vivid reminiscence by a character in a movie

²⁷ For example, Aristotle, *Rh.* 141lb 25; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Rhet.* 10.17; Cicero, *De Or.* 3.52.202; *Rhet. Her.* 3.22.37; 4.34.45; 4.55.68.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Rh.* 141lb 25.

²⁹ Theon, *Prog.* 11, pp. 45–47 – using the pagination of George A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric*, ed. and trans. George Kennedy, WGRW (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2003); similarly Pseudo-Hermogenes 10, 86; Aphantonus 12, 117–20; Nicolaus the Sophist 11, 166–68; John of Sardis 12, 218–21.

³⁰ Also, Nicolaus the Sophist 11, 167.

³¹ Quintilian, *Inst.* 8.3.62; see also 4.2.63–65; 6.2.29–36; 8.3.62–72; 9.1.27; 9.2.20 for further passages that describe the nature and role of *ekphrasis*.

³² Quintilian, *Inst.* 8.3.65.

³³ Quintilian, *Inst.* 10.7.15; for fuller discussion of the relationship of *ekphrasis*, *enargeia*, and *phantasia*, and ancient psychological theorization of their role in prompting feelings for the purposes of persuasion see Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination, and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009).

³⁴ Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.2.29–32.

or play creates feelings in the viewer. The audience may not be shown visually what the description describes, rather the power resides in the vivid description that generates imagination and feelings such as love, hatred, terror, disgust, and so on.³⁵ Most of us can probably remember a ghost or scary story we heard at some point as children which kept us up all night, it having so triggered our imagination that every creak or noise in the house was enough to make us feel frightened. *Ekphrasis*, *enargeia*, and *phantasia* are critical concepts for understanding how depiction functions in New Testament writings. And they are of central importance for an understanding of how imperial motifs were deployed to persuade people reading or listening to the contents of New Testament writings whether as individuals or as groups.³⁶

Ancient treatments on the use of ekphrasis in persuasion also state that the images evoked in the minds of listeners should not depart far from lived experience. This also expresses a key property of oral/aural culture, that what is described remains close to the lifeworld of listeners.³⁷ This is an important component in assessing the importance of imperial iconography in shaping the persuasive strategies of New Testament writings. To take an example that seeks to create a visual image of an imperial reality as a means of persuasion, let us consider the description of being dressed as soldiers to describe ideals of Christ identity (1 Thess 5:8 and Eph 6:10–18). There are obvious ways in which experience of imperial culture shaped the contents of these passages.³⁸ In the latter case, the author uses ekphrasis to depict withstanding the assaults of “the evil one” as being clad with Roman armour:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power; put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, for our struggle is not

³⁵ A good example is the “Indianapolis Speech Scene” by Captain Quint played by Robert Shaw in the 1975 film *Jaws*. The speech is a vivid account of sailors suffering attacks by tiger sharks after the USS Indianapolis was sunk by a Japanese submarine on July 30, 1945, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9S4IKplsbs>, accessed December 17, 2024. It illustrates well the way a speech uses vivid details and invites listeners to furnish their own impressions of the scene and thereby experience the terror of the event.

³⁶ This is not to assume that New Testament authors were schooled in these techniques. The value of such theorization is that it expresses both the importance of vivid speech and its role as a strategy in awakening emotion and thereby persuasion.

³⁷ Ong, *Orality*, 42; closeness to lifeworld is one of the categories he names as characteristic of oral culture that is important for our discussion here.

³⁸ 1 Thess 5:8 is less thorough going than the Ephesian passage but has the same effect: Paul exhorts the Thessalonians “to be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation” (1 Thess 5:8) in a context where Paul has just referred to an imperial reality where people say, “There is peace and security [εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια]” (5.3), two terms that were repeatedly deployed to describe the benefits of imperial rule. For an excellent account of Eph. 6:13–17 using the tools of rhetography, Rosemary Canavan, “Armor, Peace, and Gladiators: A Visual Exegesis of Ephesians 6:10–17,” in *The Art of Visual Exegesis: Rhetoric, Texts, Images. Emory Studies in Early Christianity*, ed. Vernon K. Robbins, Walter S. Mellon, and Roy R. Jeal (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 241–61.

against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on the evil day and, having prevailed against everything, to stand firm. Stand, therefore, and belt your waist with truth and put on the breastplate of righteousness and lace up your sandals in preparation for the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

The backdrop of this vivid depiction is close to the lived experience of the listeners. If they had never seen a Roman soldier, they would have known – if only from coins – the many iconographical depictions of armoured soldiers including the emperor that they encountered in their daily lives. Moreover, these images would have aroused feelings within them relating to battle and ultimately victory, again conveyed through widely seen images representing the success of Roman rule. If we ask what emotions these associations would have prompted, including pro or anti-imperial sentiments, we should imagine a variety of responses depending what one's social identity was as free, freed, enslaved, male, female, young, old, poor, wealthier, and so on. The metaphor deployed in the exhortation asks readers to imagine themselves as adult free/d males who are soldiers enjoying a particular kind of social agency. We can speculate many other listeners did not possess such agency (for example the wives, children, and slaves instructed in Eph. 5:22–24, 6:1–3 and 6:5–8). From the author's perspective, the persuasiveness of the account depends upon the listeners adopting the implied social identity the author champions. On one level, by likening Christ identity with Roman soldiering, there is an implicit endorsement of imperial attitudes and experiences. On another level, taking imperial terms and transposing them so that they refer to the content of Christ religion and opposition to evil powers results in an imaginary that moves beyond a strictly imperial location. We could not say, however, that such language necessarily prompts an anti-imperial sentiment, indeed the success of the metaphors depends upon a strong degree of sympathy with imperial militarism.

Even where New Testament authors do not deploy more sustained ekphrastic description, it repays attention to consider the uses of imperial sounding language against the backdrop of imperial iconography. This may be seen for example where authors use terms such as “gospel,” “saviour,” “victory,” “peace,” “triumph,” “battle,” or terms associated with them. Even the many references to God or Jesus placing enemies under Jesus' feet, (Mk 12:36 par.; Acts 2:35; 1 Cor. 15:25; cf. Rom 16:20; Eph. 1:22; Heb. 1:13; 2:8; 10:13; also Phil. 2:9–11 and Col 3:1–4) a clear allusion to Ps 110:1 and an early resource for Christological confession, also have resonances with the lived visual experience of Roman imperial

realities since a favoured iconographical depiction on media ranging from coins to monuments portrayed Roman emperors towering over kneeling or seated defeated persons. The point is not to deny the importance of Hebrew Bible passages in the construction of Christological claims, but rather to attend to the other valences such language carried with it and how the deployment of such metaphorical language helped to increase the persuasive impact of writings. When we remember that New Testament and other early Christian texts were probably not read by individuals (since most could not read) but rather were performed in public reading, we should regard this language as creating images in the minds of listeners who also associated other meanings and experiences of imagery.³⁹

3 Examples of Scholarly Attention to Roman Imperial Imagery and Empire Criticism

With these formulations of orality and persuasion in mind, we turn now to explore three studies that engage visual culture in different ways in their analysis of New Testament texts. The first by Brigitte Kahl offers a semiotic treatment of Paul's letter to the Galatians to help lay bare both the political ideology promoted by imperial visual culture and Paul's challenging of it.⁴⁰ The second by Robyn Whittaker engages visual culture and ekphrastic conventions to investigate a paradoxical application of imperial imagery in the Book of Revelation to promote an anti-imperial message.⁴¹ The third by Rosemary Canavan, uses Social Rhetorical Interpretation to explore the Colossian motif of being clothed in Christ and how it relates to Roman imperial visual culture in the Lycus Valley where Colossians was composed.⁴² The visual culture these studies engage is represented by a variety of media. In each case, the authors argue that Paul, John

³⁹ For representations of enthroned emperors in imperial temples and their connection with the citation of Ps. 110:1, D. Clint Burnett, *Christ's Enthronement at God's Right Hand and Its Greco-Roman Cultural Context*, BZNW 242 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), where he argues that imperial motifs did not cause the citation of Ps 110:1 but rather that "the earliest Christ-confessors presented Jesus's co-enthronement at God's right hand in cultural terms familiar to the inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world, which includes royal and imperial temple and throne sharing" (9). Burnett appeals to imperial monuments and material culture amongst which I would include iconographical depictions in other media.

⁴⁰ Brigitte Kahl, *Galatian Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished*, Paul in Critical Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009); for a further application of her method, Kahl's doctoral student, Davina C. Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission*, Paul in Critical Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), which though published a year before Kahl's work is dependent on her pioneering work, exegetical method, and insights.

⁴¹ Robyn J. Whitaker, *Ekphrasis, Vision, and Persuasion in the Book of Revelation*, WUNT II/410 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

⁴² Canavan, *Colossians*.

the Divine, and the author of Colossians are engaging the ideologies communicated through the visual depictions on imperial media and in some manner inflecting and challenging those ideologies. The studies are instructive for the way New Testament scholars engage imperial visual culture in their exegesis of biblical texts. While these studies do not expressly invoke the phrase “empire criticism,” their accounts engage imperial realities to show ways in which the New Testament writings they treat were related to or used Roman imagery to oppose imperial realities.

3.1 Brigitte Kahl: *Galatians Re-Imagined*

In *Galatians Re-Imagined*, Brigitte Kahl deploys visual exegesis to investigate the relationship of Galatians to its Roman imperial context. Through her book, she exhorts New Testament scholars to develop visual literacy as critical to interpretation of Galatians and New Testament writings more generally. Her empire critical reading of Galatians criticizes scholarship that depoliticizes Paul, his letter, and its audiences in favour of apolitical exegetical and historical critical treatments as well as theological ones. For Kahl, without attention to the political matrices in which Galatians was written and received, the text will not be fully understood either historically or theologically. Attention to the imperial visual culture that shaped Paul’s world in general and the Galatian audience in particular is critical to a liberative historical and theological reading of the letter. Kahl’s empire-critical engagement expresses a hermeneutical orientation that invites what she names “critical reimagination,” to examine the degree to which Paul’s letter to the Galatians resists or does not oppose Roman imperial realities, and how such resistance (or not) shapes (or should [not] shape) contemporary Christian responses to empire.⁴³ A critical reimagining of Galatians and Paul more generally means both a re-evaluation of Paul’s relation to the Roman Empire as well as of Reformation-oriented readings of Paul that have at once depoliticized the apostle and folded him into a prevailing contemporary politics of domination, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and so on. Her engagement deploys historical critical tools of exegesis, but she does so in a way that reads Galatians in the light of two forms of intertextuality – a scriptural one that relates Galatians to Hebrew Bible narratives of exodus and exile and a second that examines visual intertextuality to relate Galatians to political iconography associated originally with Attalid domination of Galatia and, later, the Roman empire. By attending to Paul’s engagement with Israel’s heritage in the light of the Christ event and Attalid and Roman imperial imagery in the service of a gendered ideology of domination and violence, Kahl discovers in Galatians a “hermeneutical invasion” that subverts imperial power with a counter imperial message.

⁴³ First articulated by Kahl in “Reading Galatians and Empire at the Great Altar of Pergamon,” *USQR* 59.3–4 (2005): 21–43.

She locates the letter within an area of Asia Minor twice colonized, once by Hellenistic rulers and then by Roman ones. Kahl deploys the tools of semiotics to investigate the way Hellenistic and Roman depictions (both in literature as well as material culture) characterized the inhabitants of Galatia as inferior colonized peoples. Her chief tool for laying bare the political ideology that ruling powers promoted by the Attalids and the Romans is a modified version of the semiotic square also known as the Greimas Square developed by the Lithuanian French linguist Algirdas J. Greimas in the 1960s. The Greimas Square uses structuralism to analyze ways in which meaning making is governed by binary oppositions which co-exist and are promoted ideologically in a host of structural relationships. In the case of Attalid and Roman iconography these binaries include slave vs. free; citizen vs. barbarian; insider vs. outsider; male vs. female; conqueror vs. conquered; dominant vs subservient; and so on. The ideology sought to shape subjects to interpret the world around them according to these binary oppositions. Kahl's analysis exposes them and their operations and then seeks to show the ways in which Galatians disrupts them by inverting them and then placing its audiences in a mutually reciprocal paradigm that is known through mystical participation in Christ rather than an oppositional binary one of imperial ideology.

Attention to imperial depiction serves to recover the liberative political implications of Galatians. Especially important for Kahl's analysis are monuments celebrating the victory by Attalus I (241–197 BCE) over the Galatians, wandering Celtic tribes of people from Thrace who were dominating most of Asia Minor for several decades in the third century BCE and requiring its residents to pay them tribute. Attalid victory resulted in dynastic rule over most of Asia Minor until being conquered by the Romans. The most famous iconography celebrating Attalid conquest is the third century BCE statue "The Dying Gaul" – one of a series of sculptures of defeated Gauls – which survives as a Roman copy displayed at the Capitoline Museum in Rome (Figure 1).

Kahl contextualizes these depictions by chronicling Greek and Roman literary depictions of the residents of Galatia – both Gauls and Celts – as unruly barbarians. The second image central to the use of depiction in her empire critical reading of Galatians is the Pergamon Altar erected by Attalid I's son Euhemes II in the first half of the second century BCE. The altar's iconographical program depicts the victory of Zeus and the Olympian gods over the Titans (Figure 2).

She sees the altar's iconography operating at several levels of meaning; for a reading of Galatians, a critical one is the way it represents Attalid (Olympian) victory over the Galatians (Titans) depicted as underworld monsters. Both cases – those of the conquered Galatians and the altar taken together with depictions of the Galatians by Greek and Roman writers – furnish crucial resources for developing a visually literate way of reading Galatians. According to Kahl, the assemblies of Christ followers in Galatia suffered being stereotyped by Rome as a

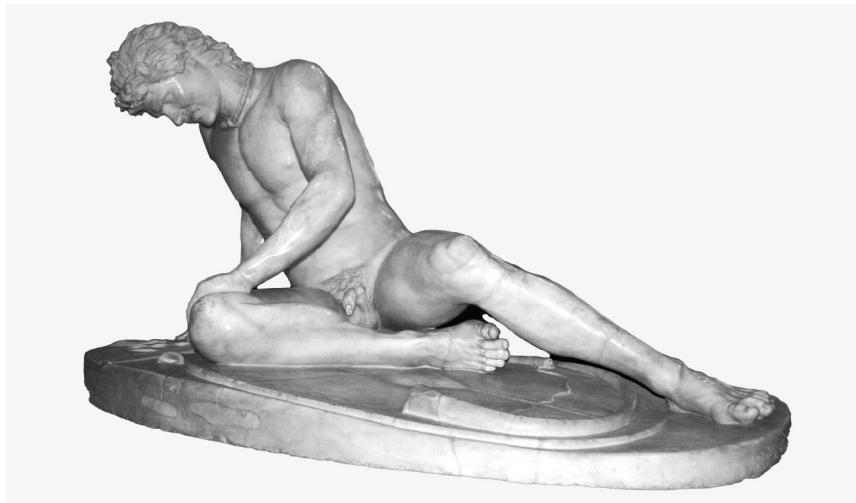


Figure 1: Dying Gaul, photo by Jean-Pol Grandmont, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0.

subservient, disreputable, and barbarous people in need of Roman civilization. Only when one recognizes the value laden associations of the term Galatia does one realize that the “Galatians” named in Paul’s Letter designates more than a territory – whether residing in North or South Galatia debated amongst New Testament scholars – but an ideologically charged word that carried with it a host of unsavoury connotations. Her critical re-imagination of Galatians with the help of depictions of the residents of Galatia in both visual and literary media aims to uncover the original challenges of Paul’s Christ religion to the Roman Empire’s way of configuring the world. She thus seeks to recover the political dimensions of Paul’s letter which she also hopes will instruct proclamation and engagement with contemporary forms of empire.

3.2 Robyn Whitaker: *Ekphrasis, Vision, and Persuasion in the Book of Revelation*

The second study is Robyn Whitaker’s analysis of anti-imperial rhetoric in the Book of Revelation.⁴⁴ The Apocalypse has been the object of a good deal of iconographical and empire critical investigation.⁴⁵ While there have been several studies that explore the rhetorical features of the Book of Revelation, Whitaker’s

⁴⁴ Robyn J. Whitaker, *Ekphrasis, Vision, and Persuasion in the Book of Revelation*, WUNT II/410 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

⁴⁵ For example, Christopher A. Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and The Book of Revelation*, *Divinations: Reading Late Ancient Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) and Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) are two notable ex-



Figure 2: Gigantomachy frieze, Pergamon Altar, Pergamonmuseum, Berlin, photo by Claus Ableiter, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

study is notable for the way it attends particularly to uses of ekphrasis in Revelation as key to understanding its persuasive strategies and its engagement with Roman imperial iconography, especially in the form of plastic art. Her study explores John's use of word pictures to situate the Apocalypse in an imperial culture filled with images of the emperor and gods. She argues that it is impossible fully to understand Revelation without reference to imperial iconography and that John's ekphrastic descriptions are designed both to resist ideas communicated through that imagery as well as to present a God who – unlike the emperor and the Greek and Roman pantheon of gods – cannot be depicted. To put it differently, John deployed ekphrasis to give an epiphanic experience of God while at the same time rejecting imperial representations via statues and other media of the emperor as divine. As such, ekphrasis created a competing iconography with depictions of the gods and the emperor; vivid speech pointed beyond representations of the emperor and gods to a transcendent reality transcending the limits of portraiture. Whitaker focuses on ekphrastic passages in Revelation (Rev 1:9–20 – the Son of Man figure; 4:1–11 – the throne room; and 5:1–14 – the Lamb, in contrast to 12:3–4 – the Dragon; 13:4–15 – the two beasts; and 17:1–19 – the whore Babylon, their counterparts in plastic art) to show that Revelation offers representations of God in competition with imperial iconography. Through an analysis of ancient treatments of rhetoric, especially in the *Progymnasmata*, she summarizes five elements that are components of *ekphrasis*: vividness, clarity, appropriate style

amples of studies that attend to imperial media as crucial for reading Revelation in its ancient context.

for the subject matter, verisimilitude, and language that emphasizes the visual sense. John's use of ekphrasis engaged his audience's personal experiences and sought to foster a transformative encounter with God. Depictions in Rev 1:9–20; 4:1–11 and 5:1–14 were intended to place before the eyes of listeners the described topic, to awaken an experience of the portrayed phenomena, and to persuade the listeners through the transforming experience mediated by speech to worship God as opposed to the emperor. However, to enhance verisimilitude and clarity, John also drew upon his audience's experiences of the plastic arts to help his audience see what he was describing. Thus, in his presentation of the imperial throne room of Rev 4:1–11, John drew on experiences and knowledge of Roman imperial images and Greco-Roman myths to make his depictions magnify both their persuasive and experiential qualities.

John's development of the counter texts Rev 12:3–4; 13:4–15; and 17:1–9 used ekphrasis in order vividly both to give eyes to his listeners to see and interpret the depictions of the emperor and the imperial rule around them, as well as to awaken in them experiences of fear and revulsion. While John used his portraits as a kind of decoder ring for understanding that what one saw in imperial iconography was in no way what it meant, even though his images were fantastical, they nevertheless preserved features of what his audience might have experienced. Thus, for example, she considers John's representation of the beast of the earth as having the power of making fire fall from the sky (13:13) and speech (13:15) in the light of literary evidence of theatrical effects of thunder and lightning produced for temples dedicated to the emperor and mechanically animated statues of him. More specifically, she analyzes John's use of the term *εἰκών* (13:14,15–16; 14:9,11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4) to describe the beast as a reference to imperial cult statues.

Throughout her analysis Whitaker also draws attention to John's development of Hebrew Bible texts. She argues that focussing solely on biblical parallels, however, will not result in an accurate enough understanding of John's rhetorical strategies of persuasion. One must also read Revelation with a view to the visual tokens of the Roman Empire John polemicized against. Both biblical texts and images as well as imperial iconography must be understood aggregately in order fully to understand Revelation. Although she nowhere uses the phrase "empire criticism," Whitaker's treatment of Revelation's rhetoric and its allusions to imperial iconography models an engagement with biblical texts attentive to imperial realities and their critique.

3.3 Rosemary Canavan: Clothing the Body of Christ

The third study is Rosemary Canavan's treatment of clothing metaphors in the Book of Colossians, specifically found in Col 3:1–17, but also often recurring in the earlier Pauline corpus (for example, Rom 13:14; 1 Cor 15:53; Gal 3:27; also

Eph 4:24). In that passage, Paul or another author writing in his name used the motif of putting on and putting off clothes to describe having a Christ identity and turning away from that which is antithetical to it (Col 3:8,10,12,14). She is particularly interested in the ways Colossians' depictions of dressing and undressing can be informed by imperial visual media depicting the dress of the emperor, his family, and other ruling elites, as well as enemies of the imperial order. These media included statues, stelae, funerary monuments, and coins, as well as representations of conquered peoples in various states of dress. Canavan incorporates these visual depictions to consider the ways a first century audience would have conceived the author's use of clothing metaphors to depict the ideal of being a Christ follower. She employs a multidisciplinary approach to exegesis, utilizing a range of interpretive tools to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Colossians passages. She reads them in the context of the imperial visual culture of the Lycus Valley where Colossians was written, as well as the broader network of neighboring cities with regular social interactions with the valley, such as Ephesus, Smyrna, and Aphrodisias. Canavan undertakes her analysis with the help of social identity theory and social rhetorical interpretation. Social identity theory considers ways in which in-group identities are formed over against others. Colossians constructs an identity for its audience in Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea (where the letter was read; Col 4:13,15) over against others conceived to be outside the group. Canavan reconfigures Vernon K. Robbin's model of social rhetorical interpretation while at the same time preserving his notion of texts composed of and informed by a series of textures.⁴⁶ The texture metaphor describes sets of weaving of meanings functioning in different ways that together form the dynamics of a text's semantic domains: inner texture (how the text relates to itself through repeated words, concepts, narrative design, and argumentation, and sensory-aesthetic aspects); intertexture (how it relates to items outside the text such as objects, historical events, texts, customs, values, roles, institutions and systems), social and cultural texture (that which can be understood with the help of sociology and anthropology), and ideological texture (the political and social meanings of a given text and their relations to broader social and political realities, including those of the contemporary interpreter). The text is produced by an implied writer for an implied reader and exists as the result of a real author seeking to communicate with a real audience that the text seeks to persuade. There is a dynamic relation between the text, the Graeco-Roman world, the original audience, and the world that shapes the modern interpreter. Canavan attends to visual imperial culture in several of these textures: inner texture analysis attends to clothing metaphors within Colossians; intertexture considers the use of clothing to construct identity both in terms of what one physically wears as well as how dress was used to communicate

⁴⁶ For Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*; for Canavan's refinement, *Clothing*, 57–66.

meaning in imperial iconography; ideological texture considers ways in which depictions of dress created political and social identities and the symbolic universe the author of Colossians crafted for its audience to live within and interpret the world around them.

Canavan's specific treatment of dress in visual media examines both the things we can arguably expect the audiences of Colossians saw and how they were invited through the semantic codes of that iconography to champion certain virtues, avoid vices, and interpret the world around them in pro-imperial ways. She also examines the places where the audiences would have encountered different depictions of dress (temples and shrines, commemorations of the dead, honorific monuments, in architecture, and in domestic sculpture). She further identifies the various places his audience would have seen Imperial iconography celebrating the emperor, his family, his military and civic achievements, for example in imperial temples, other temples, at games, on coins, commemorative monuments such as triumphal arches, and tombs of imperial dignitaries. Especially useful in the interpretation of Colossians' clothing imagery are the surviving reliefs of the sebasteion at Aphrodisias where the military successes of a series of Julio-Claudian emperors were showcased through representations of conquered people in various postures of subjugation, differing states of dress, and hairstyles (kneeling, suppliant, grieving, half naked, in im/properly arranged costume, in military uniform, coifed or unbound hair, covered or uncovered head, and so on). Following Maier's analysis of this imagery in his interpretation of Colossians' representation of Christ's rule, which includes barbarians and Scythians (Col 3:11b), Canavan investigates the author's treatment of "putting on Christ." She argues that this concept serves as a counter-imperial juxtaposition. In this view, the first-century audience was encouraged to conceive of itself as not beholden to the imperial reality proclaimed through such images, but rather to the rule of Christ.⁴⁷ Through her extensive analysis of iconographic representations of dress, Canavan conceives Colossians' treatment of the body of Christ (Col 1:18,24; 2:19; 3:15) that has "put off the old nature" and "put on the new nature" (3:9–10) as promoting an identity construction complexly textured within its imperial context.

⁴⁷ Harry O. Maier, "Barbarians, Scythians, and Imperial Iconography in the Epistle to the Colossians," in *Picturing the New Testament: Studies in Ancient Visual Images*, ed. Annette Weissenrieder, Fredericke Wendt, and Petra von Gemünden, WUNT II/193 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 385–406; Harry O. Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," *JSNT* 27 (2005): 323–49.

4 Assessment and Conclusion

The rhetorical approach to engaging imperial depiction in understanding the presence of imperial metaphor and language in the New Testament, as well as the three studies briefly described above, occasion some concluding observations. The first relates to the confidence we may place in a rhetorical construction. Even if we correctly identify a rhetorical strategy, this does not mean that such rhetoric was successful. Whatever an author or authors may have imagined, that may not mean that audiences were persuaded by their writing. Indeed, the Book of Revelation's strong warning against those who engage in idolatrous exercises such as consuming idol food (Rev 2:14,20) indicates that however much John was opposed to imperial realities, at least some of his audience was tolerant of them. Indeed, the vigorous apocalyptic response to them may indicate that the problem Revelation was facing was not persecution of its audience by the Roman Empire, but rather too friendly relations with it. On this account, we cannot therefore speak simply of early Christianity being "anti-imperial" or "opposed to the Roman Empire." Nor can we speak in a blanket way about such opposition, since authors – like their audiences – lived in a world whose existence assumed prevailing imperial institutions that created a social order in which they could voice their opposition. One may be an anti-capitalist, but the paper or computer that one uses to voice one's opposition to capitalism depend on it to be voiced. This is a simple observation, but one that is easy to forget in imagining a Mediterranean religion like Christianity as somehow transcending the world, a hazard all too prevalent in theological expositions idealizing ancient Christ religion. The second point arises from the observation that early Christianity was populated by people of different identities: free, freed, slaves, males, females, children, the elderly, physically challenged, wealthier and impoverished members, and so on. Combinations of these categories resulted in different permutations of meaning amongst authors (broadly conceived) and recipients. There was not a single experience of the Roman Empire, there were multiple ones. Moreover, the way it was experienced was not consistent even within a single permutation of identity since the practices of the everyday lives of the empire's inhabitants whether Christ followers or not created different identities, social formations, values, and the like, indexed to different practices and situations. The person who used Roman currency to buy bread and thereby signaled their participation in the Roman economy could have sung hymns at another time using language claiming for Christ alone titles that were ascribed to the emperor in the imperial cult; the same person may have done these things, but their identity was not the same. One must attend to the importance of salience in calculating what was determinative in any given situation.⁴⁸ These observations are

⁴⁸ For salience and group formation see Éric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*

relevant for the three studies described above since in different ways each tends to assume a consonance between author and audience and so each also tends toward a monocular approach to both of them. We may ask, taking up Kahl, to what degree Paul's views – assuming that they were informed as she argues by a subversive resistance to ideologies communicated in statuary and monuments depicting the victory over Celts and Gauls – were shared by his audience, shared in the same way specific to differently indexed social identities, or even to what degree they were conscious of what she alleges Paul was aiming at, if indeed he was aiming at that. There is a circularity to an argument that reads a monument in the light of a letter and then argues that that monument or set of iconographies is determinative of the content of a letter. While one is persuaded that elites viewed Gauls and Celts as disreputable barbarians, this does not mean that the audience of Galatians – if it was made up of ethnic Gauls/Celts, a position that must be argued and not assumed – was motivated to pursue a Christ religion that overcame such prejudices. The point is dramatized by recognition that less than 10 percent – some argue as low as 2 percent – of the general population was literate. Most did not travel more than at most a few dozen kilometres from their places of residence. How then does a monument in Pergamon – a world away – speak to the daily experiences of Galatians? To what degree can we assume that the descriptions of Galatians by literate elites affected the self-perceptions of the members of Christ assemblies Paul addressed? Similarly, while Revelation may have prompted an epiphanic experience of God, or while Colossian references to dress find resonances in imperial iconographical ideals, it is not necessarily the case that whoever the audience was, it was persuaded to seek such experience, or that the depictions of dress were designed to prompt other associations. We can make a more minimal argument that attention to such iconography helps to arrive at a thicker and richer understanding of a writing, but movement from understanding to theories of operationalization in anti-imperial ways is a further step that is not always easy to determine.

These observations prompt a final cautionary observation but nevertheless positive assessment. When using empire criticism one ought to be modest and as precise as possible in one's claims and thereby avoid an over-determining analysis that speaks too simply or monolithically of New Testament texts motivated by either an anti or a pro imperial sentiment. Empire criticism is important and valuable, but one must be aware that it can create the object it seeks to analyse and draw conclusions that its approaches predict. All of that said, empire criticism remains a valuable approach when used carefully to move

in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–250 CE (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); the intersectional analysis of Kartzow enriches and complexifies Rebillard's treatment of the ways time, place, and situation activate different aspects of identity and make them determinative for self-understanding and those of others.

beyond modern theologies enshrined in private devotion or inattentive to the politics of either the ancient world or those of the contemporary interpreter. A value of the studies of Kahl, Whitaker, and Canavan is that they invite readings that are not parochial or blind to political dimensions arguably contained in New Testament texts. As such, contributions like theirs show that attention to imperial depiction is important in assessing the social location and self-understanding of early Christ followers.

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