

Religion and Politics: A Fresh Look at the Imperial Overtones in the New Testament

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since E. P. Sanders' colossal deconstruction of the Lutheran understanding of Paul in relation to Judaism back in 1977,¹ a surge of interest has invaded Pauline studies. This shift has arguably taken the place of the previously prominent Historical Jesus movement as the primary focus of New Testament. One of the many facets of this breath of fresh air has been the reading of Paul in light of the context of the Roman Empire and the accompanying Caesar cult. Many scholars today have taken this even further by suggesting that Paul consciously writes his epistles in a way that incorporates very specific imperial "buzz words" in an attempt to undercut the authority of the Emperor and thereby placing the risen Jesus Christ in his place.

The purpose of this presentation is to investigate this claim against many of the prominent Pauline passages. From that point, fresh questions need to be asked: How much weight, if any, does Paul give to certain imperial coded language within select passages? If Paul did intend to use these terms, how likely would it be that his hearers would have caught on? How influential was the imperial cult during the middle of the first century? Does this evidence bring some fresh clues to the table about Paul's theology concerning the powers at large? Does this shed any light on Paul's apocalyptic eschatology? If Paul meant to counter the claim of the lordship of Caesar with that of the proclamation of Jesus, are there any Christological implications that have not been thoroughly explored? Does the context of the Roman Empire shed a new light of context on previously awkward passages?

All of these questions deserve fresh attention, analysis, and answers that do justice to the evidence available. This attempt will only be able to scratch the surface, for the literature on this subject has become vast and complex. Particular attention will be given to select treatments of Romans, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

If one were asked, what the biggest and fastest growing religion in the Mediterranean world during Paul's lifetime, one may be quick to think of the Christians as is described in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. What may come to most as a surprise is that archeology, inscriptions, Greek writers, and historians all confirm that the Roman Caesar cult² was the fastest growing phenomenon of the time. Recent studies have found that the imperial cult had such a momentous area of influence in the Greco Roman world that many are suggesting that it was so widespread³ that it would be *impossible* to ignore its influence.⁴ Paul Zanker makes the point well:

¹ See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 81-107, 236-8.

² When I use the word "cult," I do not carry the modern 21st century meaning of a group labeled heretics by the orthodox camp. Cult means "care" such as agriculture (care of the fields) or horticulture (care of the flowers). The Caesar cult was the religious devotees to the Emperor and his imperial ideology.

³ Peter Oakes, a leading researcher in this field, comments: "I would assume that there was some expression of the imperial cult in *every town* of size in the eastern Roman Empire, with the possible exception of exclusively Jewish areas." 'Re-mapping the Universe: Paul and the Emperor in 1 Thessalonians and Philippians' *JSNT* 27:3 (2005) 307. Emphasis mine.

Previously, the ruler cult was instituted sporadically in one city or another, usually for a particular occasion. But now it appeared everywhere, almost simultaneously, not only in “free” cities, but in the administrative centers of the provinces, and even, in settlements without civic status. The imperial cult rapidly became *the most widespread of all cults*.⁵

The large scale of influence concerning the Caesar worship and ideologies can be demonstrated in many ways. Multiple statues of the previous Caesars (now deified) could be found in the local temples. Regular sacrifices were offered up to them in worship and adoration. Philo makes multiple comments on the buildings that were erected on behalf of the emperor: “We have evidence of this in the temples, and porticoes, and sacred precincts, and groves, and colonnades which have been erected, so that all the cities put together, ancient and modern, which exhibit magnificent works, are surpassed, by the beauty and magnitude of buildings erected in honor of Caesar.”⁶ Yet, it went much further. The emperor cult permeated public life and the social structure by infiltrating festivals, statues, coins, athletic contests, games, sacrifices, rituals, prayers, feasts, birthdays, and calendar changes.⁷

One thing remains certain: no matter which Caesar was in office, they demanded exalted titles be lavished upon them. Interestingly enough, the public expression of these titles was widespread. John Dominic Crossan makes the point well:

In Paul’s lifetime Roman emperors were deemed divine, and, first and foremost, Augustus was called Son of God, God of God. He was Lord, Redeemer, and Savior of the World. People knew that both verbally from Latin authors like Virgil, Horace, and Ovid and visually from coins, cups statues, alters, temples, and forums; from ports, roads, bridges, and aqueducts; from landscapes transformed and cities established. It was all around them everywhere, just as advertising is all around us today. *Without seeing the archeology of Roman imperial theology, you cannot understand any exegesis of Pauline Christian theology*.⁸

The Emperors were therefore often spoken of and called “son of god”, a title that many Christians would consider stolen from Jesus Christ. Quite to the contrary, θεου υιος appears not only in reference to Augustus but also in references to Tiberius, Nero, Titus, and Domitian.⁹ The whole of the habitable world had decreed him (Caesar) honors equal to those of the Olympian gods.¹⁰ From the perspective of the ancients living during the 1st century, Caesar was easily considered “the newest god in the pantheon.”¹¹

Although it may be hard for 21st century westerners to understand, the ancients had no quarrels with mixing religion and politics. In a world dominated by Roman imperial power, religion was intricately woven into the political, social, economics, and domestic structures of daily life.¹² Holidays, feasts, architecture, currency, and inscriptions were all used to promote the

⁴ See the rigorous study in P. A. Brunt, ‘Laus Imperii’, excerpted in Richard A. Horsely, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 1997) 25-35.

⁵ Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images*, excerpted in Richard A. Horsely, ed., *Paul and Empire* 72. Emphasis mine.

⁶ Philo, *Legatio* 150.

⁷ The fact that the calendar was changed to begin on Augustus’ birthday, and was therefore celebrated with an anniversary, shows how integrated the imperial cult was in the daily lives of those in the Greco Roman world.

⁸ John. Dominic Crossan, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus’s Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom*, (San Francisco: Harper, 2004) x. Emphasis added.

⁹ Robert L. Mowery, ‘Son of God in Roman Imperial Titles and Matthew’, *Biblica* 83 (2002) 104. Mowery goes on to make the important point that these five emperors combined reigned nearly 100 years. His conclusion is that everyone in the surrounding areas would be aware of the imperial implications of calling one a Son of God.

¹⁰ Philo, *Legatio* 149,

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 60.

¹² Carter, ‘Resisting and Imitating the Empire’ *Interpretation* (56) vol. 3. 261.

Caesar cult's permeation into everyday life of the Greco Roman world. It is significantly important to note that ancient writers could speak of religious subjects and consciously have in mind significant political overtones. Their readers would likewise have no problem recognizing the two of these.

DETAILED ANALYSIS¹³

Critical analysis will now be given to particular passages of interest in select books of the Pauline corpus. Did Paul use imperial rhetoric concerning Caesar, the empire, and the growing imperial cult in his teaching and preaching about the Christian faith? The book of Romans, the most obvious place to detect these influences, makes a good place to start.

Romans 1:1 *παυλος δουλός χριστου ησου κλητος αποστολος αφωρισμενος εις ευαγγελιον θεου*, “Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.” *ευαγγελιον θεου* refers to the saving message embraced and believed by the followers of Jesus Christ. Of importance to this study, the point must be pressed that Paul’s readers would be very familiar with the term *ευαγγελιον*. The Roman readers of the epistle would have immediately recognized the term denoting the celebration of the birth or ascension of the emperor. It was an announcement of good news about the enthroned Caesar who has been highly exalted for bringing peace to the whole world. Modern Christians tend to think of the gospel as a narrow thing to get them into a relationship with God. In the Greco Roman world, the main *gospel* that might be heard was the news of, or the celebration of, one or another of the Caesars.¹⁴ This understanding of the “gospel of Caesar” was widespread in all of the eastern Mediterranean cities by the 50s AD,¹⁵ making it a significant piece of sociological evidence for the understanding of the early Christian writings. Rome declared that the emperor had conquered the entire world and was now reigning as lord. Paul, understanding this concept well, tried emphatically to make the point to his readers that it was Jesus Christ, not Caesar, who had defeated the powers (via the resurrection) and was therefore the *true* lord of the world! Good news indeed.

Paul’s readers could not have missed the rather subtle but deliberate attack on the claims of the empire. It seems (as with other terms below) that Paul was countering the claims of the imperial cult with the claims concerning Jesus Christ. In a monumental study on *Paul and Empire*, Horsley concludes that “insofar as Paul deliberately used language closely associated with the imperial religion, he was presenting a gospel as a direct competitor of the gospel of Caesar.”¹⁶ N. T. Wright follows suit by saying that “Paul’s gospel was a royal proclamation aimed at challenging other royal proclamations”.¹⁷ Without the crucial background of the empire, Caesar cult, and inscriptions, one would miss this point which was enormously significant to Paul’s theology.

Romans 1:3 *περι του υιου αυτου*, “concerning his son.” This further defines the gospel of God in v. 1. Son of God was a special title of significance in the OT, referring to the king of Israel, Israel itself, and the coming Messiah.¹⁸ Yet, Jesus is the son in the relational sense to the

¹³ Greek text excerpted from the United Bible Societies *Greek New Testament* 4th ed.

¹⁴ N. T. Wright. ‘Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire’, 165, extracted from Horsley’s *Paul and Politics*.

¹⁵ Horsley, *Paul and Empire*. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 140

¹⁷ N. T. Wright., ‘Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire’, excerpted from Horsley’s *Paul and Politics*, 168

¹⁸ See lists and discussion in *TDNT* 8:335-62 and Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 12-22. Dunn makes an interesting comment in the conclusion of his study; “Certainly ‘son of God’ as applied to Jesus would not necessarily have carried in and of itself the connotation of deity” (p. 22).

Father,¹⁹ of which the literature is vast. Yet, Jesus would not be the first person to come to the mind of the Romans when the phrase “son of God” was heard, read, or spoken. To emphasize the point, John Dominic Crossan says it elegantly:

There was a human being in the first century who was called “Divine,” “Son of God,” “God,” “God from God,” whose titles were “Lord,” “Redeemer,” “Liberator,” and “Savior of the World.” Who was this person? Most people who know the Western tradition would probably answer, unless alerted by the question’s too-obviousness, Jesus of Nazareth. And most Christians probably think that those titles were originally created and uniquely applied to Christ. But before Jesus ever existed, all those terms belonged to Caesar Augustus.²⁰

The issue must be pressed: did Paul willingly and openly apply the Emperor title “son of God” to Jesus in order to undermine the claims of the widespread Caesar cults? Much of recent studies on Paul in his relation to the empire suggest so. As was pointed out earlier, Augustus, Tiberius, Nero, Titus, and Domitian all were widely labeled as “Son of God”.²¹ The numerous Roman inscriptions seen throughout the empire containing these son of god formulas supplement this evidence. The intention of the titles given to the various Caesars was to proclaim the ‘good news’ that imperial power was being transferred in an orderly manner from deified fathers to their sons.²² Currency can be cited as further evidence. The Roman coins called the Emperor DIVI FILIUS, or “divine son”. Paul wished to get across to his readers that Jesus, not Nero, is the *true* lord of the world who has been highly exalted by his Father. The point being: Jesus Christ is the *reality* of which Caesar is the *parody*.

τοῦ γενομένου ἐκ σπέρματος δαυὶδ κατὰ σάρκα, “who was born out of the seed of David according to the flesh.” γενομένου is used only here and in Gal. 4:4 in the Pauline corpus, which is Paul’s distinctive usage when referring to the birth of Jesus. ἐκ σπέρματος δαυὶδ is a clear declaration that Jesus was understood to be the messianic Son of David. This one was the long awaited Messiah that was hoped for by the prophets of the OT.²³ Although the Son of David overtones would have been implied by Paul, there is also a different emphasis given that needs examination. In the Romans world, the ruler’s fame and level of superiority was determined by the length of his lineage. Many of emperors during the first century would have tried to trace their ancestry back to the initial founders of Rome, that of Romulus and Remus. This line of 700 years was the longest that any ruler worldwide at the time could claim to. Even if the Greeks wanted to talk about the mighty Alexander of Macedon, his lineage couldn’t compare to that of the Caesars whom looked back to the founding of Rome. What Paul was trying to imply was that Jesus Christ was the descendant of David, who went back 1000 years.²⁴ Therefore, according to the criteria imposed by the Romans themselves, Jesus Christ surpasses any governor, king, prefect, or Caesar they could name.

Romans 1:4 ἡσοῦ χριστοῦ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν, “Jesus Christ our lord.” Of particular interest here is the title of κύριος given to Jesus Christ. Paul would have had in mind the lord of

¹⁹ See particularly Luke 1:35 and Heb. 1:5.

²⁰ Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus against Rome Then and Now*, 28

²¹ Many times the title would be an expanded title: “Son of (insert name of deified father’s name) God.”

²² Mowery, ‘Son of God in Roman Imperial Titles and Matthew’, *Biblica* 83 (2002) 105.

²³ This fact is now universally agreed upon, see 2 Sam 7:12-16; Isa. 9:7; Jer. 23:5-6, 33:14-18; Ezek. 34:23-31, 37:24-28; *Pss. Sol.* 17:23-51; 4Q 147.

²⁴ So far N. T. Wright is the only one to point this out (as far as I have seen), but his arguments are quite convincing and fit the context like a glove. See Wright, *Romans 1-8: Paul for Everybody*. 4.

Psalm 110:1,²⁵ the *adoni* who sat at the right hand of Yahweh. Yet, the most surprising thing is how it was used in the Roman Empire. *κυριος* is probably the most well known Caesar²⁶ title proclaimed throughout the Greco Roman world. At the most popular level, people in the eastern Mediterranean applied the term *kyrios* to the Roman emperors from Augustus on.²⁷ Everyone would have known who the title referred to and what sort of authority it carried.

One could see that the Emperor²⁸ is again being undercut in his authority when his titles are being transferred to the risen lord. This can be seen in Phil. 2:11, where the citizen of the Roman colony Philippi now have to confess Jesus Christ as the highly exalted *κυριος*, and no longer Caesar. At each of his 230 usages, it would seem that Paul wishes for his readers to reflect on an ongoing theme: “Jesus is lord and Caesar is not.”²⁹ Despite later Christian dogmatics, calling Jesus the *κυριος* was not necessarily a title of divinity for Paul.³⁰

Romans 1:16-17 ου γαρ επαισχνομαι το ευαγγελιον... δικαιοσυνη γαρ θεου εν αυτω αποκαλυπτεται, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel... for in it the righteousness of God is being revealed.” God’s gospel is revealing God’s own δικαιοσυνη.³¹ Contrary to popular reading, this does not refer to a status of morality that God bestows upon believers. Rather, Paul sets δικαιοσυνη in the context of his Jewish background. קדש /הקדש essentially has a concept of relationship, with the emphasis on God’s faithfulness to his covenant purposes of justice and salvation.³² This interpretation is highly controversial in evangelical circles today, who continue to hold onto the Lutheran understanding of the δικ- word group. Arguments and details aside for the moment, it can be very reasonably concluded that Paul had in mind the Hebrew meanings of δικαιοσυνη when speaking of the gospel. “Justice” in the restoration sense of the covenant to create a new multi-ethnic family originally promised to Abraham makes best sense of Paul’s argument as a whole. The Roman emperors prided themselves in establishing peace and justice among the empire; labeled the *Pax Romana*. Therefore, Paul’s declaration that the gospel of King Jesus reveals God’s *dikaio syne* must be read as a deliberate laying down of a challenge to the imperial pretension. If justice is wanted, it will be found not in the *euangelion* that announces Caesar as Lord but in the *euangelion* of Jesus.³³

It can be reasonably concluded that Paul must have felt and intended the silent protest against the Caesar cult located in Rome. His strategic usage of carefully placed imperial buzz words from the very first verse of the epistle makes this an increasingly appealing interpretation.

²⁵ This is the most common OT verse quoted in the NT, used some 23 times in reference to Jesus.

²⁶ There are surviving inscriptions/coins giving the title of *κυριος* to: Augustus, Herod the Great, Herod Agrippa I and II, Caligula, Nero, and Domitian. See discussion in *TDNT* 3:1049-50.

²⁷ Karl P. Donfried, ‘The Imperial Cults and Political Conflict in 1 Thessalonians’, cited in Horsley’s *Paul and Empire*, 217.

²⁸ The currently reigning emperor, Nero, was widely described with the title *lord of all the world*. See H. Bietenhard, ‘Lord’, *NIDNTT* 2:511.

²⁹ N. T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 69

³⁰ *NIDNTT* 2:510: “In classical Gk. of the early period *kyrios* was not used as a divine title.” Many Bible students will try to link the fact that Yahweh is Lord in the OT and Jesus is the lord in the NT. Paul would rather have his readers link that Caesar was widely called lord, and now Jesus is to be understood in *those* terms and descriptions, not in the terms of the OT *Adonai*.

³¹ The NIV consciously translates in a way that removes this possibility from the readers.

³² An entire book can be written to expound and unwrap this sentence. For further reading, see James Dunn *Romans 1-8 WBC* (Nelson: Nashville. 1988) lxiii-lxxii, 40-49; *The Theology of the Apostle Paul* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids. 1998) 334-46, N. T. Wright *Romans NIB vol.10* (Nashville: Arbingdon. 2002) 423-8; קדש/הקדש *BDB Hebrew and English Lexicon* 841-2; ‘Righteousness, Justification’ *NIDNTT* 3:352-63; ‘δικαιοσυνη’ *TDNT* 2:195-6.

³³ N. T. Wright. *Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire*, 172, extracted from Horsley’s *Paul and Politics*.

Paul utilizes the gospel, the dynasty of Jesus, son of God, lord, and justice over and against the imperial cult of the day. All of this within the first few verses of the longest Pauline writing strongly suggests a motive of intent. Paul had an anti-empire agenda which he proclaimed in the preaching of the gospel.

Philippians 3:20 **ημων γαρ το πολιτευμα εν ουρανοις υπαρχει εξ ου και σωτηρα απεκδεχομεθα κυριον ιησουν χριστον**, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we await the savior, the lord, Jesus Christ.” This text has been subject to much abuse from those adhering to a platonic view of a heavenly hope. This would not be the case if read in light of the proper historical background which Caesar and his empire makes readily available. Philippi was a Roman colony established due to the over crowdedness of the capital city and the need to spread imperial civilization across the empire. The agreement was that those who moved out of Rome into this colony would continue to maintain their cherished citizenship. Also promised was that if there was ever a worry about foreign battles, rebellions, or invaders, Caesar would promptly send troops from Rome to rescue the Philippians. Basically, Philippi was to have all the same advantages as someone living in Rome.

So what Paul is explaining to his church is that they should not await their salvation from their [so called] citizenship in Rome, but *rather* from heaven. Reading 3:20 from this angle removes the possibility of the Philippian eschatological destination in favor of the mother city “heaven.” As N. T. Wright puts it: “the point of having “citizenship in heaven” is not that one might eventually retire and go home to the mother city...if things were getting difficult in one’s colonial setting, the emperor would come from the mother city to rescue and liberate his loyal subjects, transforming their situation from danger to safety”³⁴ (see 3:21). Citizenship should not be confused with the believer’s hope. Note carefully who Paul says will come to the aid; it is the “savior and lord.” These are clearly Caesar titles³⁵ which are again used to counter his claims in light of the realities of Jesus Christ. He is the true king who will save on the basis of his imperial power.³⁶

1 Thes. 4:15 **ημεις οι ζωντες οι περιλειπομενοι εις την παρουσιαν του κυριου ου μη φθασωμεν τους κοιμηθεντας** “We who are alive and remain until the coming of the lord will certainly not go before those who have fallen asleep.” 1 Thessalonians is arguably the first letter written by Paul. Therefore, from a chronological standpoint, it would be the first time that the word *parousia* is used in Christian writings. The term was not originally used in religious contexts, save a few pseudopigraphal writings.³⁷ In the contemporary literature, it had two meanings. On one hand, it meant the “presence” of a special person. On the other hand, it refers to a specific arrival, particularly the arrival of a king, emperor, ruler, or even troops.³⁸

³⁴ Ibid. 173-4.

³⁵ What makes this passage all the more significant is that this is the only place that Paul uses the noun σωτηρ in the entirety of the undisputed Pauline corpus. Therefore, it is argued, that if Paul is going to go out of his way to use a new term to describe the identity of Jesus, it should not be understood as a casual title. Caesar was called the Savior in many local inscriptions. Paul writes 3:2-21 in a way that Jesus would fit the supposed description of Caesar like a glove, and his readers would have easily picked up on his hints.

³⁶ Oakes, Peter. ‘Re-mapping the Universe: Paul and the Emperor in 1 Thessalonians and Philippians’ in *JSNT* 27:3 (2005) 319.

³⁷ Test.Ab. 13:4, 6; Test.Jud. 22:2; Test.Lev. 8:15. E. P. Sanders argues that “The term was probably more common in Jewish literature than can now be directly demonstrated.” *OTP* 1:890.

³⁸ ‘παρουσια’ in *NIDNTT* 2:898.

This arrival was not just a typical visit in the Roman world. In many of the known inscriptions,³⁹ the evidence points to a long awaited ruler who comes to inaugurate a new era/age of peace. It is elsewhere described as the beginning of a particular Caesar's rule.⁴⁰ Again, Paul finds a phrase used to promote imperial ideology and elegantly substitutes Jesus Christ instead. Jesus was to come and inaugurate the age to come, and age of peace. He was to return and begin to reign in his capital city. Y. Khiok-Khng comments that Paul's message of imminent *parousia*... posed an obvious challenge and threat to the *Pax Romana* and the Benefactor Roma."⁴¹ If the Thessalonians thought that the *parousia* was something glorious, Paul urges them to wait and see what Jesus can do (i.e.; raise the dead). This was the only one worth waiting for.

1 Thes. 4:17 απαντησιν του κυριου εις αερα "we will meet the lord in the air." Along with the *παρουσια* of the coming lord, Paul links another imperial term: *απαντησις*. This phrase was reserved for the civic welcoming of a royal visitor to the destination city. It was also used of the triumphal entry of a new ruler into the capital of the kingdom.⁴² When Julius Caesar came to visit Italy in 49 BCE, the Roman historian Cicero wrote: "Just imagine what *απαντησεις* he is receiving from the towns, what honors are paid to him!"⁴³ Five years later, he writes the same thing about Caesar Octavian.⁴⁴ Josephus uses the word in describing the welcoming and meeting of Titus during his entry into Antioch by its citizens.⁴⁵

From these examples, it is clear that the citizens of the city to come out to meet (*απαντησις*) the distinguished visitor for the specific purpose of escorting and accompanying him back.⁴⁶ Paul takes advantage of this phrase to describe the eschatological meeting of Jesus in the air by the resurrected saints. Again Paul's point is plain. No believer- whether dead in Christ or alive at his return- would miss out on the eschatological visit of God's plenipotentiary from heaven.⁴⁷

1 Thes. 5:3 ειρηνη και ασφαλεια "peace and safety." According to Roman imperial eschatology, Caesar has defeated all of the enemies of Rome. He has inaugurated a new era, which was now being proclaimed by his "gospel." What he has established in the whole world is peace and safety. Some have suggested that this phrase is synonymous with the phrase *Pax Romana*. This was the slogan of the current 'Golden Age.'⁴⁸

Paul on the other hand seems to be denying the validity of this claim. True peace and safety will come when the true lord returns (4:15-17). Paul points to the coming day of the Lord as an event which will shatter the false peace and safety of the Empire. The believers therefore should not be lulled into passive lifestyles encouraged by false hopes preached by the imperial cult. Rather they should be seen as children of light who are alert and sober.

³⁹ Such as the *parousia* of Hadrian.

⁴⁰ See examples and references in 'παρουσια' in *TDNT* 5:860.

⁴¹ Y. Khiok-Khng. 'A Political Reading of Paul's Eschatology in I and II Thessalonians,' *Asia Journal of Theology* 12:1 (1998) 79.

⁴² J. R. Harrison, 'Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki' in *JSNT* 25:1 (2002) 85.

⁴³ Cicero *Ad Att.* 8.16.2

⁴⁴ Cicero *Ad Att.* 16:11.6

⁴⁵ Josephus *War.* 7.100

⁴⁶ This understanding should crush the so-called "Pre-tribulation rapture" view that says that Paul speaks here in 1 Thes. 4:13-17 of escorting Jesus back to heaven! This destroys the contemporary meaning of *απαντησις* used widely by the imperial cult.

⁴⁷ J. R. Harrison, 'Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki' in *JSNT* 25:1 (2002) 86.

⁴⁸ Oakes 'Re-mapping' 317

REFLECTIONS

One might wonder if anything practical can come from this study. First of all, we can see that when Paul thought of the gospel message, he didn't think of it as a bland set of spiritual laws or directions as to how to get into the afterlife. The εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ was a rich set of theological truths woven together in order to turn one from the thinking of this world to a renewed belief in God's purposes for all creation. We see that at the end of the book of Acts, Paul is preaching the message about the kingdom of God and Jesus Christ. What does one find in the opening four verses of Romans? One finds the proclamation that Jesus is the messianic Son of David, with all its royal kingdom overtones. Paul also declares that Jesus has risen from the dead via the operational power of the Holy Spirit. The gospel calls men to repent from their ways and to embrace these truths in "believing obedience" (ὕπακοην πιστεῶς- Rom. 1:5).

Secondly, it must be stressed that in Paul's world politics and religion could not be separated into two antithetical camps. Quite the contrary, "in Hellenistic-Roman society, there was *no separation* between politics and religion."⁴⁹ Paul would have been puzzled at a reading of the epistles that he wrote to the exclusion of the political dimensions. Today, many try to make their religious beliefs a separate and private part of their life. For the ancients, this was just not so. Religion was woven into everything you did, not only in how you worship. This shows that Paul wishes for his readers to adapt the same mindset; don't just make your Christian experience a *mere part* of your life – allow it to permeate your *entire life*. The coming kingdom of God is very much a political kingdom which will overthrow the opposing kingdoms of that day.

Thirdly, one can see the example of boldness in speaking forth the gospel when he deliberately uses loaded imperial phrases to the people of the empire. Paul was not timid about his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles. He hopes that his readers and converts will imitate his tenacity and desire to speak on behalf of God and Jesus Christ. Paul came to the place of these solid convictions when he made Jesus Christ his lord and therefore became a δούλος. With the correct priorities in place, obedience and godliness will surely follow.

Lastly, if Paul's answer to the parody of Caesar's empire is the promise of a new world empire under the lordship of the true Son of God, what does this say about the citizens who want to be apart of it? It certainly implies a strong ecclesiology where repentant men and women come together in the name of Jesus Christ. Their lives are not controlled by the sword of Rome, but rather conditioned by the cross of Christ. Their allegiance is not forced by an ever-growing Caesar cult but freely given to the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Their lives exemplify the coming kingdom of God by living as "New Creation" people in the here and now.⁵⁰ Those who are outside of Christ should be able to see a considerable difference in the kingdoms of this world and the people living in light of the coming kingdom of God.

EXPANSION AND REFINEMENT OF THE EXEGESIS

The evidence presented above should be clear and enlightening: Paul openly and deliberately used imperial language to teach the realities of Jesus Christ and many other aspects of the faith. The examples are numerous, vivid, and deeply entrenched in the imperial rhetoric of the day. The kind of things that Paul spoke about did more than raise a few eyebrows. Note the claim in Acts 17:7 where the crowds accuse Paul of saying that 'there is another king other than

⁴⁹ Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 12. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁰ Note how Eph. 3:10 declares that "through the church the manifold wisdom of God is to be made known to the powers in heavenly places." Paul sees the 'called out congregation' as the vessel to extend the light of the age to come to this present age and its accompanying rulers.

Caesar, namely Jesus.’ These were very serious claims. To say that Paul had absolutely no clue that what he was saying would have such an explosive impact would be like someone coming to America during the election year and talking about donkeys and elephants without the slightest clue as to what they meant. That would be absurd! There can only be one lord of the world. There can only be one gospel. The point cannot be said loud enough: “the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the gospels of the Caesars were at rivals.”⁵¹

If the weight of the evidence stands, then it poses a few questions for other passages which potentially could have their best exegesis found in the spotlight of imperial context. A challenge to Bible students would be to consider these reconstructions in light of the previous evidence:

Philippians: How can it be that Paul expects his converts to follow in his example (3:17) of leaving behind his exemplary Jewish merits and status, if none of his readers were ethnic Jews? Is Paul saying that just as he left behind his virtuous life as a Pharisee, the Philippians should likewise leave behind their allegiance to the imperial cult at large (as is climaxed in 3:20-21)?⁵² Is this best read in the light of 2:5-11, where Jesus gives the example of not taking advantage of his own privileges but rather lays them aside? What does this mean for Christians today?

Galatians: Could it be that Jewish Christians in Galatia compelled Gentile believers there to start observing the works of the law in order to secure a good legal stance before the Empire and to avoid participation in the imperial cult?⁵³ There is quite a lot of evidence that suggests that Rome would allow the Jews to maintain their ethnic identity as long as they behaved.⁵⁴ This could change the entire substructure of the book of Galatians.

Paul’s opponents: What is the identity of those who were persecuting Paul? Many evangelicals, who think that Paul only talks about justification by faith, answer that Paul was being attacked solely by Jewish opponents. Surely, it can be agreed that *some* of his persecutors were Jews, cf. 2 Cor. 11. Yet, Acts 17:7 and the way that Paul has used the imperial rhetoric makes a rather strong case that he was also being attacked by adherents to the widely popular Caesar cult.⁵⁵

Mark 15:39: How ironic is it that the only human who actually understands that Jesus is the “Son of God” is a *Roman* centurion? What sort of implications is Mark trying to assert by

⁵¹ Stanton, Graham H., *Jesus and Gospel*, 40.

⁵² See the discussion in N. T. Wright. ‘Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire’, 173-181, extracted from Horsley’s *Paul and Politics*.

⁵³ Note what Neal Elliot says in ‘Paul and Politics of Empire’ extracted from Horsley’s *Paul and Politics* 34-35: “We would expect on this hypothesis precisely the sorts of behaviors that are reflected in Galatians: a rush on the part of former pagans (4:8) to be circumcised, for its value as a marker of ethnic identity (3:3; 5:2), and thus to avoid persecution (6:12; cf. 5:11); along with a reluctance to accept full obedience to Torah that any Jew would know circumcision required (5:3; 6:13). On these terms we can understand the Galatian controversy as the result of colonizing pressures and nativist counterpressures, rather than perpetuate a caricature of an aggressive and hypocritical Jewish proselytizing campaign as the necessary background to the letter.”

⁵⁴ See Josephus *Ant.* 14.211-16; 16.166; 19.285; *Apion* 2.37; Philo *Leg. Gai.* 315-16. These bits of evidence need to be thoroughly examined. The Jews may have been concerned that the Christians, if unchecked, might somehow compromise their own rights to practice Judaism under the Roman edicts.

⁵⁵ See previous footnote (54).

saying that a member of imperial cult uses the very same Greek⁵⁶ used of the lord Caesar to refer to Jesus? Is this not a subtle anti-Caesar Christological statement?

John 20:28 What is Thomas actually saying? This ultra high title given to Jesus upon his resurrection is the very same title that the contemporary Caesar of the time, Domitian, was being widely labeled. Is John following suit with Paul in taking Caesar titles and giving them to Jesus? Would the nature of the language be different if it was not connected to the Old Testament definition of *God* and read in light of how the Caesars used it?

These deserve fresh examination using fresh resources for context if we are to be diligent Bible students and teachers. The studies of Paul in relationship to the empire are fairly new and have not been exhausted. Much more can be done for those who are willing to get down and dirty with the historical and cultic contexts lying in the background of Paul's world. N. T. Wright and Richard Horsley seem to be the main expounders of this theme, with others making small contributions. Their opponents have arisen to give their side of the story. Only continued dialogue will sharpen our ideas or see if they hold up to the fire.

Perhaps in the future, a Bible College/seminary course will have to be dedicated to teaching the intricacies of the imperial cult and its position in the minds of the various NT authors. It clearly was a force to be reckoned with in the mind of Paul. His continued service to Jesus Christ finally caught up to him, for tradition speaks that Paul was beheaded at the hands of Nero. As in most stories, once the plot thickens, the empire strikes back.

⁵⁶ Tae Hun Kim notes that υιος Θεου was only used of the various Caesars. This rare formula (without the article) suggests strongly a deliberate attack on the claim of the imperial cult that Caesar truly is the Son of God. See 'The Anarthrous υιος Θεου in Mark 15,39 and the Roman Imperial Cult' *Biblica* 79 (1998) 221-241