The State of New Testament Studies

A Survey of Recent Research

Edited by
Scot McKnight
and Nijay K. Gupta
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I (Nijay) first encountered the book *The Face of New Testament Studies*, this book’s predecessor, when I was in graduate school. I went to seminary primarily because I wanted to learn how to study the Bible in depth for personal and ministry formation. I had not studied the Bible in an academic setting prior to that. The “world” of biblical studies for this neophyte seminary student was intriguing but mystifying—so many technical terms, multiple differing perspectives, views, and ideas proposed and presented, and all of this was in flux as scholarship moved forward decade after decade. Thankfully, *The Face of New Testament Studies* (2004) gave me insight into the landscape of NT studies, provided some counsel on the key questions and issues under debate and showed me how different views go in different directions and why.

Now, about fifteen years later, the landscape inevitably has changed. Not completely, of course. To play a bit more with the geographical metaphor, we can say that certain landmarks, oceans, and mountains will probably always be there, but some parts of this “world” have grown, others have eroded, and some have gone through a life cycle of destruction and renewal. This new volume, *The State of New Testament Studies*, has a similar objective for a new landscape of scholarship: to orient readers to the field of NT studies today. We have retained the basic structure of the earlier book, but all essays are freshly written by current experts, and we have expanded the scope of the project.

At the risk of oversimplification, we can trace at least six major trends in the current state of NT scholarship, tendencies and patterns noticeably demonstrated in many of the essays in this book.

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Proliferation of Tools and Methods

The end of the last century saw a major increase of academic methods. Literary criticism, social-scientific criticism, rhetorical criticism, and sociopragmatics all added to the dominant historical-critical method. Now, in the late first quarter of the twenty-first century, we have even further proliferation of tools, methods, and perspectives. In many ways, this is salutary as biblical scholars learn from other disciplines. But it can also lead to microspecialization and minute fragmentation in the guild. Some of the program units at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, for example, are very specific, and it is easy for scholars to focus on the “trees” without stepping back and getting a sense for the whole “forest.” The PhD often forces scholars to become experts in a very narrow area, while teaching duties pull them out into broader topics in Bible and theology. Scholars have always performed this balancing act, but now they must travel further to “exit the forest,” as it were. Thankfully, books such as this one serve as a handy map for eager and inevitably overwhelmed explorers!1

Global and Diverse Perspectives

One of the major developments in biblical scholarship over the last fifteen years has been a move toward attention to and appreciation of global and diverse perspectives.2 The facile notion of “objective reading” has been roundly refuted. Marginalized voices in reading and interpretation have been welcomed in the attempt to “triangulate” meaning (to borrow a helpful idea from my friend David deSilva). And one can easily see that this book has attempted to capture this value with our own group of contributors. And no doubt this value will continue to pervade biblical studies, especially as guild leadership becomes more diverse and global. Yet clearly some fields have not been penetrated as deeply by global and diverse scholarship.

Tending to Neglected NT Texts

One of the most obvious recent trends in NT studies is increased attention to historically neglected NT texts. It is obvious that Paul and the Gospels have received the lion’s share of academic interest for several centuries, especially

1. On biblical studies methods and perspectives, see especially the essay by Dennis R. Edwards, chap. 3 of this volume.
since the Reformation and in Western Christianity. There are probably more academic books on Romans than on all the other NT books combined! But that tide is turning. Of course scholars are still fascinated with the theology of Paul and the life of Jesus, but Acts, Revelation, and the Catholic Epistles are now being studied much more.

**Sophisticated Historical Contextualization**

Biblical scholars are also much more attentive to reading NT books in their ancient context—that is, their Jewish, Greek, and Roman worlds. In the second half of the twentieth century, the study of early Judaism became a bona fide discipline. This has significantly expanded in the last several decades. We benefit today from expansive study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, critical Greek editions of almost all relevant Hellenistic Jewish literature, and fresh English translations of all of these texts—a privilege that would have been unimaginable a generation ago.

Also, in the last few decades there has been a surging interest in reading the NT and understanding early Christian life within the Roman Empire—especially under imperial authority. This has led to a brand-new subdiscipline in biblical studies called “empire studies.” Once upon a time, scholars tried to press Jesus or Paul into a Hellenistic or Jewish identity—because they were primarily focused on religious and philosophical influences, “Roman” was seemingly not an option. Now, scholars commonly see Jesus and the early church as part of a complex, pluricultural world with many influences—hence the Jew Paul writing in Greek to Jesus-followers in Rome. Again, now more than ever, NT scholars find themselves especially concerned with what archaeological news comes out of not only Jordan and Jerusalem but also Pompeii and Herculaneum, Ostia Antica, Ephesus, and Colossae. They are learning from and partnering with departments of ancient Judaism, classics,

3. I (Nijay) remember an era when I had to use a Greek concordance of the OT Pseudepigrapha that was only in print (no digital, searchable version was widely available) and only in French (no English!). Now I have instant, searchable access in Greek and English through multiple software programs. I (Scot) remember when the OT Pseudepigrapha was available only to one who either had lots of money or easy access to a library, and I also remember the excitement of the steady publication of DSS.

4. See the essay by Greg Carey in chap. 1 of this book.


and history. These are exciting times as we are able to piece together daily life in the first-century Roman world (education, religious experiences, politics, entertainment, etc.) better than ever, not only with attention to adult men but also to women and children.

Alongside this attention to historical context is an intense examination of Greek grammar and syntax, not to ignore the computer-generated tools now accessible, with regular publications and challenges to age-old paradigms. Thinking of the developments in our understanding of the Greek language leads also to the recognition today of how the texts we read in the NT were performed to their original audiences, and performance criticism highlights the surge of interest in rhetorical criticism of the Pauline letters.

Theological Interpretation of Scripture

Another major trend worth mentioning is the emergence of theological readings of Scripture. Of course, over the last two thousand years some people have always been interested in reading the Bible for its theological messages and meaning. But particularly within the academy, for far too long the guild was divided between those who read it from a confessional perspective (i.e., Christians and Jews) and those whose interests were more cultural, ideological, and historical. Though it is hard to trace the origins of “theological interpretation of Scripture,” it is now a major interest among many scholars, creating guild space for questions about the theological meaning and importance of the NT texts. This has obviously opened up fresh conversations between confessional and nonconfessional scholars; it has also turned attention to “precritical” literature on Scripture and prompted interest in the works of Catholic, Orthodox, Reformation, and Anabaptist theologians.

Looking to the Past

That brings us to a final trend in modern scholarship—special interest in reception history and history of interpretation of Scripture. Virtually all biblical scholars today readily admit that we read the NT not just off a page, but through lenses and traditions we have received from those who came before us. This helps modern readers better recognize our cultural biases and

7. See the essay by Dana M. Harris in chap. 6 of this book.
tendencies—not to erase them, but to appreciate this hermeneutical agency. This has brought new, or rather old, worlds to life so we can examine carefully how they read and interpreted Scripture. Obviously the global impact of the Bible over the last two millennia has been massive, but reception scholarship is interested not just in theologians and books but also in the Bible’s impact on music, art, politics, and popular culture.10

In twenty-three chapters, the contributors to this book, all experts in their respective fields, survey the state of academic discussion with respect to their text or topic. Each chapter breaks the conversations into a few key headings with guidance on the most important contributions, controversies, and questions. At the end of each chapter you will find a set of reflections that sum up in brief the “state of New Testament studies” today.

10. A good example of this is David Gowler, The Parables after Jesus: Their Imaginative Receptions across Two Millennia (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). European publisher de Gruyter is producing a nineteen-volume Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception (2009–) with a projected total of thirty thousand entries.
Ancient Context
Early Christianity and the Roman Empire

Greg Carey

Introduction

Jesus was “crucified for us under Pontius Pilate,” according to the Nicene Creed, itself a product of Roman imperial politics. Facing intractable divisions among his Eastern churches, Emperor Constantine convened the first great ecumenical council in an attempt to restore unity to the church. The council produced this confession—a confession that identifies Rome with Jesus’s public execution—with the emperor personally present during the deliberations.

The phrase “crucified for us under Pontius Pilate” embodies the ambiguity that marks early Christianity’s relationship with Rome. Early Christians venerated a Jewish messiah who suffered execution at the hands of Roman authorities, a brutal fact that complicated all their attempts to establish public identity. The NT’s three references to Christianoi (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16) do not indicate a new world religion populated by “Christians,” as many of us might imagine. We might better translate Christianoi as “seditionists,” or more precisely “messianists,” for each occurrence indicates the suspicion with which others regarded the movement.¹

Jesus and his first generations of followers lived within the Roman Empire and faced the pressing question of allegiance. The three Synoptic Gospels all record a scene in which Jesus confronts the question of paying taxes to Caesar, and the Gospel passion narratives all raise the problem of Jesus’s identity as king—or seditionist. Writing to Rome itself, Paul enjoins believers to submit to the ruling authorities in a passage that agitates Christian ethicists to this day (Rom. 13:1–7), but he also derides “the rulers of this age,” who, had they grasped divine wisdom, “would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8). Addressing its readers as diasporic exiles (1:1) and foreigners (2:11), 1 Peter refers to Rome as “Babylon” (5:13). This usage emerges in Jewish literature only after Rome’s sack of Jerusalem in 70 CE, and it appears in Revelation as well, most notably in chapters 17–18. Without question, Rome and its empire were on the minds of early Christian writers, not least in the NT. Yet it appears the first generations who worshiped Jesus developed complex and diverse—we might say, ambivalent—ways of relating to Rome and its institutions. Moreover, many interpreters have a great deal at stake in the question of how early Christians related to their imperial context.

The Stakes

We biblical scholars, who frequently cloak our passions in the language of academic objectivity, often reveal our commitments in assessing how early Christians negotiated their relationship to Rome. Those who are critical of American military, cultural, and economic adventurism—I would include myself among them—rely on Scripture as an essential resource for articulating our critiques. In a classic essay on Paul and slavery, Richard A. Horsley gives voice to this point of view.

[Paul] was evidently attempting to establish communities of what was, in effect, an international counter-imperial (alternative) society. It was international (and multicultural) insofar as assemblies were established in a number of cities and peoples, and as the assemblies in particular cities involved people of various and/or hybrid ethnic and cultural background. It was counter-imperial insofar as it owed its loyalty to Christ, who was enthroned in heaven as the true emperor or kyrios [Lord] of the assemblies, indeed of the world. . . . And it was an alternative society insofar as the assemblies were to conduct their own affairs, without interacting with the civil and other aspects of the dominant society.

2. To cite one example, consider the title and subtitle of Richard A. Horsley, ed., *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), to which I contributed an essay on Revelation.
while recruiting and expanding their movement . . . during the time remaining before the parousia of their Lord.³

Horsley foregrounds Paul’s ministry in terms not of theology but of cultural formation. In contrast to Rome’s lord, Caesar, Pauline assemblies proclaim the crucified messiah Jesus as the one true Lord. The movement expresses itself through diverse assemblies that scatter around the empire and practice “alternative” lifestyles as they await the culmination of Jesus’s rule.

Interpreters of the historical Jesus have also maximized the ways in which Jesus’s ministry amounted to countercultural resistance. Although many scholars produced important work in the 1990s, public attention focused on debates between John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright. Suspicious of the portrayal of Jesus in the canonical Gospels, Crossan argued that Jesus rejected apocalyptic theology, the expectation of God’s violent intervention to remove Israel’s enemies and establish justice in the world. Wright trusted the Gospel accounts and placed apocalyptic expectation at the center of Jesus’s ministry. Crossan begins his account of Jesus with a study of Roman imperial culture, while Wright places Jesus in the context of anti-Roman sentiment in first-century Judaism. Theological liberals gravitated to Crossan’s work, while conservatives rallied around Wright. Yet both authors agreed, and still agree, on the notion of Jesus’s ministry as a form of critique and resistance against Rome. Both Crossan and Wright identify Jesus as a counterimperial revolutionary.⁴

Crossan, who is Irish-American, and Wright, who is English, were writing at a particular point in American adventurism. With the Cold War drawing to a close, a congressional investigation had just unraveled Reagan administration interventions in Central American civil wars, and US forces had successfully invaded both Panama and Grenada. Francis Fukuyama authored his classic essay “The End of History?,” arguing that the Soviet Union’s dissolution would open the path for universal democracy and the end of large-scale conflict.⁵ The same year that Crossan and Wright published their first major monographs on the historical Jesus, President George H. W. Bush declared “a new world order” in his State of the Union address. Theorists rushed to redefine the concept of empire from a nation-state model to more abstruse networks of commercial and diplomatic

If ever the United States looked like an empire, this was the moment. Before launching into an investigation of Christian identity in the context of empire, we do well to consider some unanticipated implications. For example, a predisposition to identify with early Christianity as a counter-imperial movement can foster a peculiar exceptionalism. As assemblies who sometimes considered themselves at odds with the larger society—“aliens and exiles,” as 1 Peter would have it (2:11), and a “third race,” in the words of Aristides (Apol. 2.1), Clement of Alexandria (Strom. 6.5.41), and others—Christians defined themselves as neither Jews nor Greeks nor anything else. We Christians already have a long habit of labeling our origins as exceptional or unique. Assessing appropriations of early Christian identity in the context of queer theory, Maia Kotrosits observes, “The queer ‘early Christian’ is positioned—almost by definition—as out of alignment with and even in opposition to the Roman Empire in some way.” Appeals to Christian uniqueness have a way of turning ugly. To take one particularly dangerous example, Christian anti-Judaism often expresses itself in critiques of ancient Judaism as exclusionary, formulaic, legalistic, misogynist, and lacking in grace. What if, instead of emphasizing uniqueness, we also called attention to the ways in which Christians imbricated themselves into their cultural contexts just as their neighbors did—and just as we all do?

Practicing Empire

Appreciation for Jewish history is essential for understanding early Christian engagement with Roman hegemony. Ancient Israel and Judah encountered several ancient empires. The four beasts of Daniel 7:1–8 characterize four

7. As we have seen, the term Christian applies to the Pauline assemblies and other circles of Jesus devotees only anachronistically: I use it pragmatically as convenient shorthand for those groups. Within the NT, Christian is not a self-designation but an accusation on the part of outsiders. We do see traces of Christian identity in Matthew’s references to “their synagogues” (esp. 10:17), the language of churches (ekklēsiai), and in Paul’s language of being “in Christ.”
12. As with Christian and Christianity, many interpreters regard Jewish and Judaism as anachronistic. I do not.
empires as monstrous predators: Babylon, Media, Persia, and the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire. Revelation later draws on these same beasts, rolling them all into a single monster in its characterization of Rome (13:1–2).

This Seleucid Empire, particularly under the reign of Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), proves a crucial antecedent to the Roman Empire. The Seleucid dynasty inherited a major portion of the empire established by Alexander the Great. It is all but impossible to reconstruct Antiochus’s motives and behaviors, but for our purposes what matters more is how Jews—both contemporaneous and in later generations—interpreted his reign and the conflicts it engendered. As our sources remember it, Antiochus embarked on a project of Hellenization in Judea and Galilee, promoting Greek language and cultural institutions as a means of unifying his empire. He established a cult of Zeus in the Jerusalem temple. When some Judeans rejected Antiochus’s reforms in 167 BCE, Antiochus responded with repression. Jewish tradition has it that Antiochus banned Jewish practices, forbidding circumcision and forcing Jews to eat pork. Such religious oppression would have been highly unusual—if not unique—in the ancient world, and historians rightly question whether our primary sources fairly characterize Antiochus. Nevertheless, the ensuing revolt led to Antiochus’s expulsion from Judea in 164 BCE and a more decisive overthrow of Seleucid power in 142 BCE. The following eighty years witnesses waxing and waning levels of Judean independence, including rule by indigenous priest-kings. We should note that while some Judeans resisted Antiochus, others took a more accommodationist stance. These “renegades” function as villains in Jewish memory.

Far clearer than the history is how the conflict with Antiochus stamped itself on Jewish modes of self-understanding and of the relationships between Judaism and empire. For one thing, the Maccabean Revolt had been successful, encouraging hopes of resistance among later generations. Moreover, three pillars of Jewish identity—diet, Sabbath, and circumcision—acquired even greater weight. The tradition links faithfulness to these identity markers as a cause for martyrdom. Thus we should not be surprised by the degree to which Paul’s letters reflect concerns over precisely these three items. As gentiles entered the churches, conflicts regarding these issues marked much of his ministry (see Rom. 13–15; 1 Cor. 8:1–13; 10:1–22; all of Galatians; Phil. 3:2–4:1). The Antiochene crisis set up cultural

13. As one example of a historian sifting through the problems, see David A. deSilva, Introducing the Apocrypha, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 271–86. Taking a more trusting attitude toward the Jewish primary sources is Anathea Portier-Young, Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 176–216.

behavior, what we moderns might call religious faithfulness, as a life-and-
death issue.

Rome played a prominent role in the conflicts attending Antiochus’s reign, but Judea experienced Roman power most directly in 63 BCE. Invited to intervene by both parties of a Judean civil war, the Roman administrator/general Pompey captured Jerusalem and subjected it to direct Roman rule. Roman rule over Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Idumea, Perea, and other areas continued with notable interruptions throughout the early Christian period.

The NT introduces us to a small cast of Roman authorities and to Judeans who hold various kinds of power under Roman hegemony. Herod the Great appears in Matthew’s Gospel. Herod was appointed “King of the Jews” by the Roman Senate, having driven Parthian forces from the land, and he administered the region from 37 BCE until 4 CE. Herod is noted for his monumental building projects, most notably a glorious refurbishing and expansion of the Jerusalem temple, and for his ability to sustain peace in the land and a flow of tribute to Rome. After his death the Romans divided the region into smaller administrative districts. In the Gospels we meet Herod’s son Herod Antipas, who governed Galilee and Perea until 39 CE, and Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea from 26 to 37 CE. Acts introduces us to Herod Agrippa I (called simply “Herod”)—who first governed Galilee (37–41 CE), then came to rule over all of Palestine (41–44 CE)—and Herod Agrippa II (“Agrippa” in Acts), who reigned over various parts of Palestine over a long period of time (48–93 CE). We meet Antonius Felix, Roman procurator of Judea from 52 to 58 CE, who is characterized as corrupt (Acts 24:24–27), and his successor, Porcius Festus (59–62 CE). We also encounter the high priests Annas and Caiaphas, who administered Jerusalem and the temple under Roman supervision during the career of Jesus, and Ananias, who confronts the apostle Paul.

Classic empires projected force in order to extract resources from their territories and to enforce their will within their spheres of influence. The Romans did so as well. Social historian and theorist Michael Mann describes Rome as the first successful territorial empire, exerting control through its military and by enlisting the cooperation of indigenous elites through its class culture. When Revelation presents Rome as a fearsome monster, the whole earth cries out in wonder, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” (13:4). But Revelation also points out Rome’s acquisitiveness. A Prostitute rides the Beast, and she conducts commerce with kings, merchants, and sailors. The merchants grieve Rome’s destruction because it puts an end to their commercial

system. “And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives” (18:11–13). Luxury items come first and foremost in this list of commodities, along with implements of war and slaves. The Greeks and Romans transformed the ubiquitous practice of slavery into the basis of their economies. Perhaps 20 percent of the empire’s population was enslaved, maybe as many as half the people in major cities. In his treatise On Clemency the Roman politician and philosopher Seneca recalls how the Senate considered a proposal to require slaves in the city to wear clothing that indicated their status. Once the Senate realized that the measure might reveal how many slaves lived in the city, perhaps inspiring revolt, it was dismissed as imprudent (1.24.1).

Various forms of taxation sent revenue from ordinary people to local elites and then to Rome. Indeed, the Romans did find it necessary to calculate just how much they could extract from subjected peoples without either exhausting their resources or provoking rebellion. “I want my sheep shorn, not shaved,” Tiberius reportedly scolded one prefect. Juvenal, perhaps not so satirically, advises new governors to curb their greed, rather than sucking dry the marrow of their client kings.

The Romans themselves understood how deeply their underlings resented them. The historian Tacitus depicts a speech, albeit fictional, by the British general Calgacus against the Romans: “To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire. They make a desolation and call it peace.” Likewise Sallust imagines a letter from Mithridates of Pontus to the Persian emperor. The Romans make war only for the sake of dominion and self-enrichment (Hist. 4.69.5). Are you not aware, Mithridates asks, “that from the beginning they have possessed nothing but what they have stolen: their homes, wives,

16. Horses and chariots primarily served military purposes in the ancient world.

land, and dominion?" (Hist. 4.69.17 LCL). One imagines the Romans found amusement in such fictional characterizations of themselves.

Nevertheless, living standards rose when empire flourished: even in the provinces, standards of living seem to have increased. Former generations of scholars argued that taxation from Rome and Jerusalem impoverished ordinary people in Judea and Galilee, displacing many from their homes, but that view has not withstood scrutiny. Economic grievances indeed contributed to the First Jewish Revolt of 66–70 CE. But many scholars would also argue that societies flourished under Roman domination. People of my generation recall the “What Have the Romans Ever Done for Us?” scene in the 1979 Monty Python film, Life of Brian. Inciting rebellion, Reg declaims: “They’ve bled us white, the bastards. They’ve taken everything we had, and not just from us, from our fathers, and from our fathers’ fathers. And what have they ever given us in return?” Things begin to go downhill, as characters recite the benefits of empire: “The aqueduct.” “And the sanitation.” “And the roads.” “Well, yeah. Obviously the roads. I mean, the roads go without saying, don’t they? But apart from the sanitation, the aqueduct, and the roads. . . .” “Irrigation.” “Medicine.” “Education.” “And the wine.” “And it’s safe to walk in the streets at night now, Reg.” “Yeah, they certainly know how to keep order. Let’s face it. They’re the only ones who could in a place like this.”

Whatever its marks for historical accuracy, the scene depicts the dilemma that Rome’s subjects faced. At the price of subjugation and exploitation, Rome promised peace, development, and even a measure of freedom. Revelation is the NT’s most unambiguous anti-Roman voice, but it also reveals the loyalty of local elites to Roman beneficence. Roman Asia enjoyed a strong reputation for its demonstrations of loyalty, particularly by petitioning the Senate for the right to build temples and hold festivals in honor of the empire and the emperor. Revelation 13 depicts this reality: a Second Beast from the

land encourages the inhabitants of the earth to worship the Beast, Rome—a likely indication of indigenous appreciation for Rome’s benefits and loyalty to its emperor. Such devotion was neither required nor directly rewarded; rather, it was characterized by “spontaneity and autonomy.”

Not everyone celebrated Rome’s provision of stability and commerce. Rome devoted a great deal of attention to the threat of rebellion. Indeed, the great Jewish Revolt was one of four simultaneous rebellions within the empire. And some rebellions were successful. Roman provincial administrators found themselves tugged between their duty to provide stability and revenue on behalf of Rome and the necessity to maintain decent relationships with their subjects. Judea and Galilee are especially important to early Christian interaction with Rome, largely because Jesus’s crucifixion occurred under Roman authority and because the catastrophic First Jewish Revolt casts a strong shadow on the Gospels and other parts of the NT. Ordered by Emperor Caligula to set up a statue to the emperor in the Jerusalem temple, the governor of Syria, Publius Petronius, pleaded to the populace: “I, too, am bound to obey the law of my master. . . . I myself, just like you, must submit to orders” (Josephus, Ant. 18.265 LCL). When Petronius delayed in executing this command, legend has it that Caligula ordered him to commit suicide, but in January 41 CE Caligula himself was assassinated while the order was en route (J.W. 2.184–203). Numerous NT scenes allude to this same tension. Most notable are the Gospel portrayals of Pontius Pilate trying to placate the crowds rather than crucify Jesus. We might also consider the numerous trial scenes in Acts, especially the ones involving Roman officials like Gallio (Acts 18:12–17), Felix (24:1–27), Festus (25:1–12), and Agrippa (25:13–26:32). The Gospels mention sicarii and zealots, and of course the catastrophic First Jewish Revolt (66–70 CE) shadows how the Gospels, Acts, and some other NT books look on the empire.

Resistance to Rome occurred for cultural and religious as well as economic reasons. The Jewish rebel/historian Josephus records several outbreaks of resistance prior to the First Jewish Revolt, many of which involved what we

might call cultural, even religious, grievances as well as responses to perceived Roman provocations. Apart from Jesus, several other would-be messiahs, acclaimed or self-proclaimed, emerged during the first century. Nor was cultural resistance to Rome unique to Galilee and Judea, being especially prominent in the East, where hellenization had taken root. But widespread, unified, anti-Roman sentiment apparently did not emerge. Rebellion did not extend beyond the local and the ethnic.

Proving Empire

The maintenance of empire demands significant energy, and not just commercial, administrative, and military. Empires generally find it necessary to justify their existence and promote their benefits. Certainly Rome did. We know this legitimation process as imperial propaganda.

Historiography, the kind that blurs the mythological with the legendary, provided a key vehicle for Roman legitimation. The History of Rome by Titus Livius traces Rome back to the Trojan Aeneas and identifies its founder as Aeneas’s descendant Romulus. So does Virgil’s Aeneid, also composed under Augustus’s reign. Details vary from one source to another. Nevertheless, the larger picture clusters around (1) Aeneas’s military prowess and his destiny to found a great nation and (2) Romulus’s violent rise to power, along with (3) rumors that Romulus was the son of Mars, the god of war. Romulus kills his own brother in a dispute concerning where to establish the new city, shouting, “So perish anyone else who shall leap over my walls.” In the Aeneid Jupiter speaks of the Romans what they already believe about themselves: “I have no fixed boundaries to the dominions, no fixed term to their rule. I have given them empire without end. [The gods will show] favor to the Romans, masters of the world, the people of the toga. This has been decreed” (1.278–83). To build, fight, conquer, and dominate: that is Roman Manifest Destiny.

The Romans likely produced their foundation narratives to form their own sense of identity, not to persuade others. But they also relied heavily on imperial propaganda promoted by those they had conquered. The massive

33. For concise introductions to Roman propaganda, see Longenecker, “Peace, Prosperity, and Propaganda”; John Dominic Crossan, “Roman Imperial Theology,” in Horsley, In the Shadow of Empire, 59–73.
building projects of Herod the Great, all sorts of projects—including a spectacular renovation of the temple—reflected Roman architectural models.\(^{37}\) Herod named his greatest city Caesarea and his Jerusalem fortress Antonia.\(^{38}\) As Eric Meyers and Mark Chancey put it, “Anyone who saw [Caesarea] from sea or land would associate it with Caesar and witness the visual grandeur of the Roman Empire as well as the loyalty of one of its most prominent client kings.”\(^{39}\)

Rome happily installed self-congratulatory propaganda throughout its empire, and indigenous elites reinforced the message. Copies of Augustus’s “Deeds of the Divine Augustus” (Res gestae divi Augusti) have been identified all over the empire, often inscribed in monumental buildings in both Greek and Latin. In preparation for his own death, Augustus praises both his conquests and his beneficence. If modern standards of modesty do not apply to ancient emperors, Augustus could also rely on local support. In 29 CE the province of Asia promised a crown “for the person who devised the greatest honors for the god” Augustus.\(^{40}\) One Greek inscription notes that Augustus, “son of God,” “has by his benefaction to all people outdone even the Olympian Gods” (I. Olympia 53). Better known is the Priene Inscription, which proclaims Augustus’s birthday as the new New Year’s Day, attributes Augustus’s accomplishments to providence, and identifies Augustus as the savior who fulfills prophecy and brings peace.\(^{41}\) Christians will recognize in the inscription the Greek terms *epiphanēs* (epiphany), *sōtēr* (savior), and *euangelion* (often translated “gospel”). Indeed, Rome promoted its own eschatology, contemporaneously naming Augustus’s reign a “golden age.”\(^{42}\) As we have seen, Greek cities literally competed for the privilege of expressing their devotion to emperor and empire through the dedication of temples and festivals.

Rome extended its marketing campaign in images as well as words—and in the combination of the two. Early coins in Roman Corinth blend Roman and Greek motifs, placing an image of Julius Caesar on one side and Bellerophon riding Pegasus on the other.\(^{43}\) Roman coins frequently depict the deities Mars and Victoria, war and victory, together.\(^{44}\) After vanquishing the First Jewish

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41. For discussion of these oft-cited primary sources, see Longenecker, “Peace, Prosperity, and Propaganda,” 17–19; Elliott, *Arrogance of Nations*, 29.
42. Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, 90–121.
Revolt, the Romans issued an “extensive” series of *Judaea Capta* coins, all attesting to Roman domination over the Jewish people. Roman sculpture and coinage frequently show powerful Roman men physically threatening partially (or totally) exposed foreign women, an artistic interpretation of conquest as rape. Davina C. Lopez captures the pattern: the women as “embattled, disheveled, captured and subdued, and shown in deferent line.” The Altar of Peace (*Ara Pacis*) shows the goddess Roma holding a sword and sitting on the weapons of Rome’s vanquished enemies. Roman peace proceeds from conquest.

The Persecution Question

Every significant layer of the NT, along with a great deal of other early Christian literature, features a preoccupation with the likelihood of persecution. Paul identifies himself as both a persecutor (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13, 23; Phil. 3:6) and a victim of persecution (1 Cor. 4:12; 2 Cor. 4:9; 11:23–26; 12:10; Gal. 5:11). He also shows awareness that early Christian communities were vulnerable to persecution (Rom. 12:14; Gal. 6:12; 1 Thess. 2:14–16; 3:4, 7). We must assume that Paul’s references to imprisonment, or “chains,” also indicate persecution (Rom. 16:7; 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:23; Phil. 1:7, 13–17; Philem. 1, 9, 23). A brief review of allusions to persecution in Paul’s undisputed letters alone reveals his intense awareness of the persecution he faces along with his colleagues. Unfortunately, we cannot know the actual reasons Paul persecuted Christian believers, who were almost assuredly other Jews, or why he and others experienced persecution. He alludes to persecution both from fellow Jews and from gentiles (2 Cor. 11:26). Unfortunately, he never discloses the exact nature of the persecution he describes or the authority under which it occurred. This omission leaves open the question of whether Roman authorities were involved.

The canonical Gospels include diverse warnings regarding the likelihood of persecution. While Paul identifies specific forms of persecution, such as flogging and imprisonment, attended by the possibility of execution, the Greek word *thlipsis* can indicate simple hardship. Yet the Synoptic Jesus identifies such hardship as a condition of discipleship and warns his followers that they will face a fate like his (Matt. 10:17–18; 24:9; Mark 13:9–11; Luke 21:12–19). The Synoptic “little apocalypses” (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) alert readers

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45. See the discussion in Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, 35–38.

to the inevitability of end-time persecution. As for John’s Gospel, following Jesus leads to expulsion from the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2): because such an action is implausible within the context of Jesus’s own ministry, scholars have expended enormous energy in attempting to explain it. Near John’s conclusion, Jesus informs Peter as to the manner of the apostle’s death (21:18–19), a passage cryptic to modern readers but perhaps crystal clear to John’s audience. In their own ways, all four Gospels identify the suffering of believers with that of Jesus (e.g., Mark 8:34–38; Matt. 16:24–27; Luke 9:23–26; John 15:18–25).

Space does not allow a deep survey, but the trend continues throughout the NT. In Acts Jesus’s followers meet persecution from Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, from Herod, and from Jewish and gentile adversaries alike as the gospel progresses around the Mediterranean. Basically, they are accused of subverting public order in one way or another, but there’s also a sense that their Jewish persecutors are trying to quash the proclamation of Jesus. For Acts, however, persecution leads to the church’s expansion. Hebrews, James, and 1 Peter all attempt to engage persecution and suffering as a theological question, with 1 Peter most acutely aware of persecution throughout the epistle. Revelation identifies its author as a victim of persecution in some sense (1:9), names one actual martyr (2:13), and envisions a crowd of martyrs (6:9–11). Among the earliest Christian apocalypses, persecution amounts to a primary concern for the Shepherd of Hermas and as a real concern in the Apocalypse of Peter and the Ascension of Isaiah. The letters of Ignatius emerge from the bishop’s journey toward martyrdom in Rome (110 CE).

Clearly persecution was on the minds of early Christians, including persecution at the hands of local and (sometimes) imperial officials. Apart from early Christian sources, however, indications of official persecution against Christians are few. We receive the impression that no Roman policy proscribed Christianity; instead, early Christians encountered various kinds of resistance at diverse times and locations. The Romans were suspicious of all kinds of associations as potential hotbeds for sedition, and Christian assemblies probably looked very much like other associations. The emperors Tiberius and Claudius expelled Jews from Rome, presumably for the same reasons other groups were occasionally expelled: to protect public order. (Acts 18:2 alludes


to one of these occasions.) It is possible, perhaps likely, that the second expulsion involved a conflict among Jews regarding Christianity.\(^{51}\) But official persecution of Christians as Christians is hard to identify.\(^{52}\) The combination of widespread Christian concern over persecution and the lack of external evidence leaves historians in a quandary.

Three potential episodes of persecution attract high levels of interest. A massive fire devastated most of Rome in 64 CE, under the emperor Nero. Writing more than fifty years later, the historian Tacitus claims that Nero blamed the fire on Christians and subjected multitudes of them to all sorts of horrible deaths (\textit{Annales} 15.44). Tacitus clearly does not like Christians, but neither does he like Nero: many historians suspect his account is exaggerated or even fictional.\(^{53}\) A Christian tradition that Nero would return from the dead (or that he never really died) to persecute believers emerged fairly quickly, lending plausibility to the notion that Nero did execute Christians in Rome.\(^{54}\)

A second possible instance of persecution involves the emperor Domitian. Church tradition traces the book of Revelation to Domitian’s reign and traces Revelation’s several allusions to persecution to Domitian’s policies. This narrative suffers from a total lack of confirmation from Roman sources, and no remotely contemporaneous Christian sources link Domitian with persecution. Revelation may well reflect various kinds of persecution in Roman Asia, but official imperial persecution is highly unlikely.\(^{55}\)

More intriguing is a third instance, reflected in correspondence between the Roman governor Pliny the Younger and the emperor Trajan (Pliny, \textit{Epistles} 10.96–97). Writing from Bithynia, adjacent to Roman Asia, around 110 CE,
Pliny seeks Trajan’s advice: anonymous accusations have arisen against Christians. Pliny does not seek out these Christians, and he knows no policy for dealing with them. But he does examine the accused, offering them clemency if they curse Jesus and offer sacrifices to the imperial deities. Remarkably, Pliny mentions there are “many” such Christians in his region, and that his intervention has led to a revival of commerce at local temples. Trajan essentially approves of Pliny’s practice.

The historical problems with these three episodes are formidable. In my view, the all-but-ubiquitous fascination with persecution among early Christians, combined with the admittedly sketchy information we receive from Roman sources, suggests a historical dimension to the concern. For the NT period, it appears there was no official, widespread, or programmatic persecution of Christians by Rome. Yet Christians found it both difficult and occasionally dangerous to negotiate life within the empire. Several factors may explain this danger: a general (and official) suspicion of mysterious associations and possible pressure to participate in festivals and other occasions that demanded public expressions of loyalty to Rome stand first among them.

Diverse Testimonies

With respect to early Christianity’s relationship to the Roman Empire, we might begin with the obvious. Devotees of Jesus established communities of worship around the Mediterranean world, very rapidly and especially in cities. By the time the apostle Paul reaches Damascus, in southern Syria, a church is already present. So also for Antioch, a metropolis in northern Syria, and Ephesus, another metropolis in Roman Asia (now southwestern Turkey). When Paul writes a letter to the Romans, multiple congregations have already formed in that city. Moreover, these assemblies demonstrate a remarkable desire to stay in touch with one another by means of travel, letter writing, and the sharing of documents. One scholar characterizes their close bonds as a “holy internet.”

That these assemblies should establish themselves over such a vast territory, inhabiting diverse, albeit cosmopolitan, cultural centers, and enduring over a long period of time, invites reflection. We should intuit that their experiences, contexts, and challenges were diverse—and that the ways in which they inhabited their imperial situation were likewise diverse. We should

56. Friesen, Imperial Cults.
avoid discussing how they “related” or “responded” to the empire, as if they stood apart from their contexts. They no more stood apart from Rome than contemporary North American readers do from Washington, Ottawa, or Mexico City. If Paul finds no offense in food that’s been offered to the gods (see esp. 1 Cor. 8:1–13), and John of Revelation condemns eating such food as idolatry (Rev. 2:14, 20), we may attribute their apparent disagreement to diverse contexts. Alternatively, they may have disagreed on principle, although one cannot separate context from conviction so neatly.

If ancient Christian traditions were diverse, so are the opinions of their interpreters. We may only begin to tease out the diverse options according to which Christians may have expressed resistance or accommodation.58 Consider these options:

- The Romans claimed to administer true justice. Does Paul’s emphasis on justification by grace, in a letter specifically addressed to Rome, amount to a sophisticated form of sub-tweeting? Some interpreters see Paul’s language as a kind of “hidden transcript,” a coded form of cultural subversion.59 But if resistance happens only in hiding, does it make a sound?
- Roman society is often characterized in terms of competition for status: Should we call it “counterimperial” that Jesus advises people not to promote themselves at banquets (Luke 14:7–11) or that Paul exhorts believers to bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2)?
- Romans addressed their emperors as Son of God, savior, and lord, celebrating the peace they brought to the world. Early Christians referred to Jesus in precisely the same terms. What would Caesar say about that?

Nowhere do we encounter early Christians calling for armed revolt. We can identify clear instances of resistance when we see literary criticism of Rome, and we can probably agree that the refusal to comply with Roman law and to show loyalty to the empire both constitute resistance. The following case studies are far too brief, and their interpretation is often controversial, but they suggest the diverse ways in which early Christians related to the realities of empire.

Memories of Jesus

The Synoptic Gospels reflect how early generations of Christians remembered Jesus, activating those memories in their own contexts. Matthew, Mark, and Luke often differ in how they present these traditions, and we should not assume they share a common view of Rome and its representatives. That said, we may remember that they hold in common key elements of a basic story line.

The Synoptics present John, the baptizer of Jesus, in the context of Isaiah 40:3, a call for the remnant of Israel to return from exile. John’s baptism of repentance prepares a people—in the symbolic Jordan River, no less—for a messianic age in which they reclaim their land. They also portray Herod Antipas as a fickle and unstable local tyrant who executes John. Luke chooses not to narrate John’s execution but later informs us that Herod is seeking to kill Jesus. Jesus’s reply to hearing of this plan—“Go and tell that fox” (13:31–32)—suggests neither admiration nor allegiance, and (only in Luke) Herod later mocks Jesus during his trial (23:1–12). Interpreters debate whether Jesus shares John’s message, but there is no question that John and Jesus alike meet death at the hands of the ruling authorities.

In all three Synoptics Jesus encounters a man tormented by many demons. The demons identify themselves as “Legion,” a word that within Rome’s empire points directly to a basic Roman military unit. The story plays out as an anti-imperial fantasy. Jesus drives Legion into a herd of pigs, who drown themselves in the sea. Pigs are unclean animals, and Jewish anti-imperial literature commonly depicts Greek and Roman oppressors as coming from the sea. The drowning pigs remind us what happens to Pharaoh’s soldiers in Exodus 14–15 and what many Jews fantasized would happen to Roman armies. The passage is replete with military imagery: the pigs form a military unit (agēlē), Jesus “dismisses” them (epetrepsen), and they charge (ōrmēsen) into the sea.

Jesus faces opposition throughout the Gospels, but things reach a new level when he enters Jerusalem at Passover season. Passover is a liberationist as well as a patriotic festival. Celebrating Israel’s liberation from Egyptian bondage, the festival provided the occasion for notable outbreaks of sedition. Roman governors, like Pontius Pilate, typically allowed the temple authorities to manage affairs in Jerusalem, and it is precisely those temple authorities whom Jesus antagonizes—and who initially arrest Jesus. We may read

60. Anthony Le Donne, Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).
61. I have omitted Matthew’s portrayal of Herod the Great, at once fearful and murderous (2:1–11).
62. For a classic reading of this passage in Mark, see Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 190–92.
Jesus’s entry into the city and his initial confrontation in the temple as public demonstrations. Though the three Synoptics present the moment differently, the crowd responds to Jesus’s tiny parade with royal acclamation. Whether they understand Jesus correctly is open to debate. But the temple authorities directly appreciate the provocation of Jesus’s temple occupation. As tensions escalate, the temple authorities deliver Jesus over to Pontius Pilate, who holds ultimate authority in Judea. All four Gospels reflect the political dimensions of Jesus’s execution by indicating the inscription affixed to Jesus’s cross: “The King of the Jews.” Indeed, the choice of crucifixion as a means of execution likewise indicates that Pilate treated Jesus as a seditionist.63

According to the Synoptics, Jesus endured a series of public controversies in those final days. Two of them, commonly misinterpreted in popular understanding, identify Jesus as a critic of both Rome’s underlings, the temple authorities, and Rome itself. In the first controversy, Jesus faces a hostile question: Is it legal for Jews to pay taxes to Caesar? Much of Christian tradition has understood Jesus’s answer—“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17)—as an affirmation of allegiance to God and of duty to the state. However, details within the story suggest a more provocative interpretation. First, Jesus demonstrates that his interrogators hold the coin necessary for paying the tax, one that features the emperor’s image and likely blasphemous material as well. Jesus apparently does not carry such a coin, but his observant critics do. Second, readers should ponder what it means to give Caesar what is Caesar’s. What does Caesar require, after all? And what belongs to God? Both Caesar and the God of Israel claim authority over the entire world and everything in it. Jesus’s reply posits a direct conflict between the interests of God and those of Caesar.

The taxation controversy demonstrates Jesus’s disregard of Roman claims. The story of the widow’s mite voices Jesus’s criticism of Rome’s local agents, the temple authorities. Read alone, the story appears to show Jesus advancing the widow as a model of generosity, and that is how she is generally understood. Mark and Luke, however, place her story immediately after Jesus’s critique of the scribes, who “devour widows’ houses” (Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47).64 In this context, a widow sacrificing her final resources looks more like a case study in institutional exploitation than an example of generosity.

The Synoptics consistently portray Rome and its administrative underlings in an unflattering light. They identify Jesus with John, who leads a national

63. I pursue this reading of Jesus’s final days in Sinners, 79–124.
64. That Matthew omits both this particular criticism of the scribes and the widow’s case study is a problem worthy of investigation.
movement of renewal and possibly resistance. Jesus initiates conflict with the temple authorities, to whom Rome delegated a great deal of authority, during a volatile national festival. He rejects Rome’s right to extract taxation. As the Synoptics remember things, no wonder the authorities arrest Jesus, and no wonder the Romans crucify him.

That Slippery Paul

Jesus’s crucifixion leads us directly to Paul, who has a great deal to say about it. Yet anyone who browses the Paul collection in a seminary library will recognize that Paul is a slippery character, whose legacy scholars and theologians would appropriate if only they could keep him under control. The complications attending the interpretation of Paul’s Letters involve active debates concerning which letters, even which passages, Paul actually wrote and how much we should rely on Acts for details concerning Paul’s background, ministry, and outlook. Even if we could agree on these matters, we’d still face the difficulties posed by the letters themselves.

When it comes to Paul’s outlook regarding Rome and its empire, one passage stands out as particularly vexing: Romans 13:1–7. A surface reading, which may well be correct, suggests that Paul believed Christians should be good, submissive citizens. Paul enjoins the Roman believers to “be subject to the governing authorities.” He rests this position on theological grounds that seem universal: God appoints the authorities, authorizing them to employ violence against wrongdoers. Since the authorities ultimately serve God, believers are to pay taxes and give honor to those authorities. Around this passage have many theologies of church-state relations revolved.65

Paul never argues the opposite point, that followers of Jesus should actively resist Rome. But other aspects of his letters lead many interpreters to attribute a counterimperial outlook to the apostle. In Richard A. Horsley’s words, quoted near the beginning of this essay, the Pauline assemblies constituted “an international counter-imperial (alternative) society.”66 We might recall that Paul collaborated with already-established churches too. These gatherings called themselves assemblies (ekklēsiai), language that suggests a democratic process.67 Paul proclaimed a messiah, an anointed ruler or judge who will deliver Israel, to whose reign history pointed—a messiah crucified

under Roman authority. In contrast, “the rulers of this age” are “doomed
to perish”; had they known God’s ways, “they would not have crucified the
Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:6–8). Paul commonly identified Jesus as “Lord” but
also as “Savior,” acclamations also addressed to the emperor. It is Jesus who
demonstrates divine righteousness (dikaiosynē) and faithfulness (pistis), and
Jesus who bestows righteousness, faithfulness, and peace to his followers. All
of Paul’s letters begin by extending grace and peace, Rome’s prerogatives,
to the churches.68

Interpreters struggle to reconcile Romans 13:1–7 with the insinuations
laced throughout Paul’s letters. Some remind us that all of Paul’s letters are
“occasional”; that is, they constitute direct communication with particular
groups of people in response to particular circumstances. As such, they may
not provide Paul’s abstract or general theological positions. Quite a few inter-
preters apply this framework to Romans 13:1–7. We know that the emperor
Claudius had expelled Jews from Rome, perhaps due to unrest regarding Jesus.
In Romans Paul seems preoccupied with relations between Jewish and gentile
believers, especially as Jewish believers may have been subject to particular
scrutiny after their return. On these grounds some argue that Paul intends
to protect Jewish believers who face such a precarious situation.69 The theo-
logical rationale Paul provides in Romans 13:1–7 poses the greatest obstacle
to such counterimperial readings.

Apologetic or Revolutionary?

The book of Acts seems the perfect laboratory for exploring how early Chris-
tians related to Rome. Acts offers an exquisite case study in how highly skilled
interpreters can arrive at contradictory conclusions.

Some interpreters see Acts as largely apologetic toward Rome. The book
repeatedly depicts mobs bringing believers before local Roman authorities.
According to Acts’ general pattern, people instigate a mob reaction against
the missionaries, but local Roman officials do not enact judgment against the
preachers.70 Indeed, the believers routinely defend themselves against charges

68. For counterimperial readings of Paul, see Neil Elliott, Liberating Paul: The Justice of God
and the Politics of the Apostle, Bible and Liberation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994); Richard A.
Horsley, ed., Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society (Harrisburg, PA:
70. Although Roman authorities do not seek out the believers as objects of persecution in
Acts, their motives and behavior are hardly spotless; see Drew W. Strait, “Proclaiming Another
King Named Jesus? The Acts of the Apostles and the Roman Imperial Cult(s),” in Jesus Is Lord,
of disruption. As Agrippa says to Festus, Paul “could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor” (Acts 26:32). Acts’ divinely driven plot does undermine imperial authority, as ultimately the fate of the gospel and its proponents rests in God’s hands. But the gospel message itself, many argue, does not directly challenge Roman authority. When a centurion like Cornelius accepts the gospel, he does not relinquish his military service (see Luke 3:14). Thus Shelly Matthews argues that Acts highlights “compatibility between its concerns and values and those of the Roman Empire.”

Others find Acts implicitly counterimperial. C. Kavin Rowe considers the charges against Paul and Silas in Thessalonica—“These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also” (17:6)—and presents several cases in which the proclamation of the gospel undermines conventional imperial culture. For example, the citizens of Philippi (16:11–12, 16–24) and Ephesus (19:23–41) correctly grasp that Paul’s proclamation threatens the tie between local commerce and religion. They also apprehend what it means when the believers proclaim Jesus as king (17:7). Brigitte Kahl maintains that the expansion of the gospel, with its conquest of territories and inclusion of peoples, reverses Rome’s imperial script, showing that “God, not Caesar” rules the world.

Acts’ disposition toward Jews and Judaism complicates the picture. Although it welcomes gentiles into the church apart from the law, Acts insists that Jesus’s Jewish followers are Torah observant. In Jerusalem they worship in the temple, and they go to great lengths to demonstrate that even Paul remains faithful to the Torah (21:17–26; 28:17). Yet Acts frequently blames Jews, not Romans, for killing Jesus (2:23; 3:13; 4:10; 7:52; 10:39; 13:27–29) and for instigating persecution against the new movement (9:23–24; 13:50; 14:2–6, 19–20; 17:5–7; 18:12–17; 20:19; 23:12; 24:19; 26:11). At the book’s end Paul all but implies that due to Jewish rejection “this salvation” is moving along to gentiles (28:25–29). This mixed picture, a Torah-observant Jewish movement largely persecuted by other Jews, led Lloyd Gaston to conclude,


71. Skinner, _Trial Narratives_.
72. Christopher Bryan, _Render to Caesar: Jesus, the Early Church, and the Roman Superpower_ (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 104.
75. Brigitte Kahl, “Acts of the Apostles: Pro(to)-Imperial Script and Hidden Transcript,” in Horsley, _In the Shadow of Empire_, 149. Kahl’s interpretation is ambivalent in that she sees Acts as communicating a double message, one that would seem safe to Roman imperial readers but subversive to believers in Jesus.
“Luke-Acts is one of the most pro-Jewish and one of the most anti-Jewish writings in the New Testament.” 76 Some judge that this scheme allowed Luke to characterize early Christianity as harmless to Roman authority. As Matthew L. Skinner observes, “No one in Acts openly advocates or declares the upending of the imperial system.” 77 After all, Roman authorities generally find Paul and his colleagues innocent, expressing annoyance toward the Jews who oppose the missionary movement.

Exiles and Aliens

A good deal of early Christian literature voices tension with the larger world. In John’s Gospel Jesus admonishes his disciples to expect animosity: “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.” After all, “you do not belong to the world” (15:18–19). First Peter stands out in this respect, addressing its audience as “exiles of the Diaspora” (1:1, author’s translation). As “aliens and exiles,” they are to “conduct [themselves] honorably among the Gentiles” (2:11–12). The appeal to a diasporic identity, combined with sensitivity toward gentiles, leads some interpreters to assign 1 Peter to an audience of Jewish followers of Jesus. The letter’s later indication that it is written from “Babylon” (5:13) further suggests a Jewish audience, for only in Jewish literature after the temple’s destruction in 70 CE do we encounter references to Rome as Babylon, the first empire to destroy the Holy City and its temple. However, the letter’s reminder “Once you were not a people” (2:10) strongly points to a gentile audience, who receive references to diaspora, exile, and Babylon as invitations to identify themselves with the story of Judah.

The epistle reinforces the marginal identity it assigns to its readers by advising them not to be surprised by coming persecutions (1 Pet. 4:12). Here the question of empire comes to the fore. For like Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 Timothy, 1 Peter calls slaves and wives to submit to the authority of their masters and husbands, respectively (2:18–3:8). Immediately before doing so, 1 Peter also calls the audience to “accept the authority of every human institution,” including emperors and governors, an instruction that concludes, “Honor the emperor” (2:13–17).

We can understand this block of material—submit to authorities, masters, and husbands—in two very different ways. All three subunits include

a theological rationale: subordinate believers are to obey because it is the right thing to do. However, it’s also possible to interpret these commands as responses to the threat of persecution. First Peter identifies Babylon as its sending address and invites believers to take on a diasporic identity. Furthermore, the letter repeatedly encourages believers to submit to unjust persecution (2:12, 18–20; 3:14–22; 4:14–16), even to glorify God on such occasions (4:16). Indeed, these references to unjust persecution immediately precede (2:12) and follow (3:8–22) the calls to submission (2:13–3:7). Considered along these lines, 1 Peter places emperors and governors first among the list of those who behave unjustly toward believers and calls believers to respond by leading lives of innocence and reverence. This hardly constitutes a call for resistance, but neither is it flattering toward Babylon Rome.78

Apocalyptic Anxieties

Our final set of case studies involves the earliest Christian literary apocalypses: Revelation, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Ascension of Isaiah, and the Apocalypse of Peter. These texts participate in the literary tradition of the great Jewish apocalypses. Daniel and much of 1 Enoch respond to the Seleucid Empire of Antiochus IV, while 2 Baruch, 3 Baruch, 4 Ezra, and the Apocalypse of Abraham all react to the devastation of Jerusalem by the Romans. Their responses vary, but these early Jewish apocalypses all deal deeply with the problem of empire.79

All four of the early Christian apocalypses deal with the question of persecution. Revelation characterizes Rome through two key images: the Beast who makes war against the saints and conquers them (13:7) and the Prostitute who imbibes their blood (17:6). Hermas opens with Hermas’s vision of a woman who confronts him with his inconsistent faithfulness, concluding, “Be manly, Hermas” (Herm. 4.2, author’s translation). Hermas encounters the woman again in a second vision, and she encourages those who do righteousness and are not “double-minded”: “Blessed are you who endure the coming great persecution” (Herm. 6.7). In his fourth vision, Hermas encounters a Beast. Terrified, he hears the woman again: “Do not be double-minded, Hermas” (Herm. 22.7). Hermas summons his courage, surrenders himself to the Beast,

78. Carey, Sinners, 141–44.
79. For a survey of ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses, see Greg Carey, Ultimate Things: An Introduction to Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Literature (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005). The standard introduction to Jewish apocalyptic literature is John J. Collins, The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). We might identify many more texts as “apocalyptic,” but these are the earliest literary apocalypses.

Scot McKnight and Nijay K. Gupta, The State of New Testament Studies
and the Beast just lies down, sticks out its tongue, and lets him pass by (Herm. 22.8–9). Hermas’s manly single-mindedness subdues the monster.

Hermas shows no particular antipathy toward Rome, but Revelation does. Many interpreters see a broad critique of imperial culture as Revelation’s driving concern. Revelation acknowledges that people worship the Beast, whether the empire or its emperor (13:8–18), and it requires its audience to abstain from the imperial cults and from eating idol food (2:14, 20). It enjoins believers to keep their clothes clean (3:4) and to remove themselves from association with the Prostitute (18:4). In addition to the problems of idolatry and persecution, Revelation condemns the exploitative nature of imperial commerce (18:11–17).80

Persecution figures less prominently in the Ascension of Isaiah and the Apocalypse of Peter, but it does appear. The Apocalypse of Peter is best known for its tour of hell, where sinners suffer eternal punishments that fit their crimes. Among many offenders, Peter’s tour includes those who persecute and betray the righteous, those who speak evil of the righteous path, and those who bear false witness (27–29). Hell also includes those who have fallen away from the faith, perhaps under threat of persecution (23). All these punishments likely indicate a concern with persecution, but no counterimperial language figures directly in this apocalypse. The Ascension of Isaiah, however, appeals to the Nero redivivus myth: the devil Beliar sends a man resembling a lawless king who has murdered his own mother, a reference to Nero. This tyrant will gather followers, persecute the church, and establish a cult in his own honor. This crisis provokes the Beloved One, Jesus, to bring about a final judgment (Asc. Isa. 4:2–19). Beyond the subtle echo of Nero and the imperial cult, however, the Ascension never identifies or criticizes Rome directly.

Revelation’s canonical status brings it far more critical attention than the other early Christian apocalypses receive. The emergence of postcolonial criticism has complicated the conversation a great deal. Interpreters have long debated whether Revelation is too violent, too misogynistic, or too escapist to contribute to Christian imagination. Postcolonial theory adds another layer: to some degree every act of resistance undermines itself by relying on the very imperial culture it resists. Rome promises peace by threatening to annihilate its foes; Revelation offers peace through Rome’s annihilation. Rome promises prosperity in return for submission; Revelation’s New Jerusalem arrives resplendent in precious stones and metals. Roman iconography relies on images of women, with Rome victorious and those who resist stripped and humiliated; Revelation offers the radiant woman clothed with the sun

and the New Jerusalem, on the one hand, and the sexually debased Jezebel and Prostitute, on the other hand. It appears to many interpreters, including me, that Revelation has not transcended imperial discourse. 

The earliest Christian apocalypses all indicate concern with persecution. But while Revelation (especially) and the Ascension of Isaiah (obliquely) also critique Rome, Hermas and the Apocalypse of Peter do not. We might attribute this difference to the nature of these apocalypses: some apocalypses show a concern for the workings of history, while others are more involved with heavenly and hellish regions and the fate of individuals. Revelation and Hermas belong to the “historical apocalypse” subcategory. This literary distinction, while helpful, is not sufficient for explaining why some authors would choose the historical route while others would not. That question remains unexplained.

Reflections

Early Christianity emerged as a movement within the Roman Empire. It is a mistake to characterize early Christians as “responding” to the empire, since they lived their entire lives within that imperial reality and contributed to it. We might, however, discuss the diverse ways in which early Christians lived out their identities within an imperial context.

How early Christians related to empire matters to many interpreters. According to a traditional view, early Christianity was largely apolitical: Christians acknowledged the legitimacy of government, and they sought to obey the authorities in so far as that was possible. They recognized the possibility of unjust persecution and abstained from the imperial cult, but they did not advocate active resistance to Rome. Over the past few decades, perhaps in response to the wave of liberationist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, empire-critical research has flourished. Increasingly interpreters have appreciated early Christianity’s view toward the larger world, debating the diverse ways in which the movement may or may not have resisted or undermined Roman hegemony.


Rome created the first successful territorial empire by exploiting its military and commercial power and by enlisting indigenous elites as both beneficiaries and enablers of its rule. The Romans developed sophisticated means of promoting their version of history: Rome was fated to attain dominion, its efforts brought peace and prosperity to those who would partner with it, and destruction awaited those who would resist. Epic poetry, architecture, civil engineering, sculpture, and coinage all reinforced this message. This is not to deny the presence of cultural and economic resistance. Although revolt broke out from time to time, the Romans managed to sustain hegemony over a remarkably long period. The First Jewish revolt figured especially prominently in the formation of early Christian discourse.

Interpretation of early Christianity demands an appreciation for the movement’s diversity. By the end of the first century Christian assemblies established themselves over vast areas, engaged diverse social contexts, and in many cases endured over a significant time. A topic like “early Christianity and the Roman Empire” opens a wide range of options. Perhaps Roman hegemony is merely a contextual issue, a matter taken for granted by the first Christians but hardly problematized. Alternatively, some believers may have accommodated themselves to empire, even hoping for favor or protection from the authorities. Still other circles may have challenged widespread cultural values and symbols; without confronting Rome directly, they could have developed practices that countered those promoted by Rome. Some of those practices and discourses may have been covert, the resistance of the oppressed. Yet some believers may have condemned Rome outright, refused to collaborate with the authorities in any significant way, and awaited a final judgment. Our selected case studies show that while interpreters may hold conflicting views regarding individual texts, these options are all possible. Indeed, it is likely that we encounter them all.