

## IS PAUL'S GOSPEL COUNTERIMPERIAL? EVALUATING THE PROSPECTS OF THE “FRESH PERSPECTIVE” FOR EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The release of the new Superman movie in the summer of 2006 brought with it no little controversy when it became known that the new movie changes one of the more well-known descriptors of Superman. The traditional, unredacted description of Superman says that he defends “truth, justice, and the American way.” But in the new movie, Superman fights for “truth, justice,” and “all that stuff.”<sup>1</sup> The phrase’s omission in the new movie ignited a political controversy among the usual suspects of the talking-head class of American media—one side celebrating the new Superman’s global appeal, and the other side lamenting the unpatriotic depiction of an American icon. These responses, predictably, reflected the polarization of the right and left wings of the American political spectrum, with the right celebrating American exceptionalism and with the left happy to see it removed from this popular expression.

What was clear in the controversy, however, is that the once-noble ideal of “the American way” has fallen into disrepute among many in America and abroad. Some analysts have argued that the American war in Iraq and President George W. Bush’s so-called “cowboy diplomacy”<sup>2</sup> have played no small part in provoking a revival of domestic and foreign opposition to the vaunted “American way.” As Jonah Goldberg of *The Los Angeles Times* has said, “‘the American way’ now seems to have become code for arrogant

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Lundegaard’s opinion editorial in *The New York Times* gives a history of the phrase “truth, justice, and the American way” in the Superman myth. He shows that the phrase was not a part of the original comic book, but emerged in the broadcasts of later radio and TV serial versions of Superman. “The American way” seems to have been provoked in part by America’s struggle against fascism during World War II and communism during the Cold War (Erik Lundegaard, “Truth, Justice and (Fill in the Blank),” *The New York Times* [June 30, 2006]: Section A, page 23; on-line: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/30/opinion/30lundegaard.html>).

<sup>2</sup> Mike Allen and Romesh Ratnesar of *Time* magazine all but celebrate the demise of what they call President Bush’s “cowboy diplomacy” (Mike Allen and Romesh Ratnesar, “The End of Cowboy Diplomacy: Why the Bush Doctrine no longer guides the foreign policy of the Bush Administration,” *Time*, vol. 168, no. 3 [July 17, 2006]).

unilateralism that falls somewhere outside truth, justice and all that is good.”<sup>3</sup>

The truth of the matter is that activists, politicians, and academic elites of both America and Europe have been critical of the so-called “American Way” for quite some time—at least inasmuch as the “American Way” is perceived by them as shorthand for a totalizing and oppressive American Empire. When Hugo Chávez stood before the United Nations and accused America of being an empire and charged President Bush with being the devil incarnate, many Americans wrote off Chávez’s rant as the raving of a crackpot dictator.<sup>4</sup> What many people did not realize was that Chávez’s tirade against “American imperialism” reflects a fairly mainstream view among many scholars both within and outside of the United States. Chávez merely gave a glimpse of the kinds of things that American academics like Noam Chomsky have been saying for a very long time.<sup>5</sup>

## II. AMERICAN IMPERIALISM IN NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

Some people will be surprised to learn that the rhetoric of “empire” is not the exclusive domain of secular activists and politicians. It is also the hallmark of a fledgling movement in the academic guild of NT studies. Even among scholars of the Bible there has been a growing antipathy towards a perceived *pax Americana* that is invading the world. The scholarship emerging in this movement seeks to read the NT in light of a Greco-Roman context that was dominated by Roman imperial ideology. While this new movement has invaded historical Jesus and Gospel studies,<sup>6</sup> the movement has had an even larger impact on Pauline scholarship.

<sup>3</sup> Jonah Goldberg, “Superman vs. the Lone Ranger: Why are cosmopolitans embarrassed by the American way?” *The Los Angeles Times* (July 6, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Hugo Chávez, “President Hugo Chávez Delivers Remarks at the U.N. General Assembly,” CQ Transcripts Wire (September 20, 2006) accessed on-line: [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com): “I think we could call a psychiatrist to analyze yesterday’s statement made by the president of the United States. As the spokesman of imperialism, he came to share his nostrums, to try to preserve the current pattern of domination, exploitation and pillage of the peoples of the world. . . . As Chomsky says here, clearly and in depth, the American empire is doing all it can to consolidate its system of domination. And we cannot allow them to do that. We cannot allow world dictatorship to be consolidated. . . . I have the feeling, dear world dictator, that you are going to live the rest of your days as a nightmare because the rest of us are standing up, all those who are rising up against American imperialism, who are shouting for equality, for respect, for the sovereignty of nations. . . . Yes, you can call us extremists, but we are rising up against the empire, against the model of domination.”

<sup>5</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003). For a fairly recent counterpoint to Horsley, see Christopher Bryan, *Render To Caesar: Jesus, the Early Church, and the Roman Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Bryan points out that Richard Horsley and John Howard Yoder interpret the Gospels to present Jesus as a non-violent rejection of Roman rule (p. 41). Bryan disagrees, contending that “Jesus stood foursquare with the biblical and prophetic attitudes toward political and imperial power represented by Nathan, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Deutero-Isaiah: he would acknowledge such power, but he would also (and therefore) hold it accountable” (p. 42).

In what N. T. Wright has called a “Fresh Perspective” (FP) on Paul,<sup>7</sup> this new strand of scholarship holds as axiomatic at least two assumptions, with a third assumption being increasingly advocated in the literature.<sup>8</sup> First, it is assumed that the Roman imperial cult was pervasive in Paul’s missionary context.<sup>9</sup> Second, Paul’s gospel is, therefore, both theo-political and counter-imperial<sup>10</sup> in that it offers an explicit (and sometimes “coded”) repudiation of the Roman Empire. Third, “Paul’s gospel [therefore] confronts all imperial systems, and especially the new American empire of global consumerism and military might.”<sup>11</sup> In this new movement, the analogy<sup>12</sup> between America and Rome is so direct, that Pauline repudiations of the “powers”<sup>13</sup> of his day imply a direct confrontation of American imperial power in our own day. Thus the FP on Paul confirms the critique of American “empire” that has become increasingly common among detractors of American empire such as Chávez and Chomsky.

The contemporary political implications of reading Paul in this light were brought out in a conference held at Union Theological Seminary in New York (October 29–30, 2004), just a week or so before the hotly contested Presidential election of 2004. Hal Taussig described the conference this way:

The very fact of the conference marked a paradigm shift for the field of New Testament Studies. . . . Convened at a time where empire had re-emerged as one of the most dangerous and frightening phenomena of our time, the conference addressed directly the ways the New Testament today can help shape ways of resisting and negotiating the realities of arrogant American power today.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The phrase “fresh perspective” was coined by N. T. Wright in his 2000 Manson Memorial Lecture at the University of Manchester, a lecture which was subsequently published as “A Fresh Perspective on Paul?,” *BJRL* 83 (2001) 21–39. Wright’s recent short work on Paul also uses the term: *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). Although there are differences among the various scholars who have done work in this area, I will use “Fresh Perspective” as shorthand for the various counter-imperial approaches to interpreting Paul’s letters.

<sup>8</sup> I have taken this three-part outline of the fresh perspective from Michael J. Gorman, “The gospel alternative,” *ChrCent* 122 (2005) 36.

<sup>9</sup> The emperor cult flourished primarily in the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. N. T. Wright, “A Fresh Perspective on Paul?” 22–23: “In Rome itself, as is well known, the Julio-Claudian emperors did not receive explicit divine honours until after their death. . . . But in the East—and the East here starts, effectively, in Greece, not just in Egypt—the provinces saw no need for restraint. With a long tradition of ruler-cults going back at least to Alexander the Great, local cities and provinces were in many cases only too happy to demonstrate their loyalty to the emperor by establishing a cult in his honour.”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Richard Horsley comments on the alleged analogy between America and Rome: “The United States became the heir of the world empire and now, as the only remaining superpower, indeed stands at the apex of a new world order. . . . Many Americans cannot avoid the awkward feeling that they are now more analogous to imperial Rome than they are to the ancient Middle Eastern people who celebrated their origins in God’s liberation from harsh service to a foreign ruler and lived according to the covenantal principles of social-economic justice. Their imperial position in the new world (dis)order may be particularly awkward for Americans reflective about Christian origins. For Jesus of Nazareth carried out his mission precisely among an ancient Middle Eastern people who had been subjected by the Roman Empire” (Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire* 5).

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Col 2:10, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Hal Taussig, “Prologue: A Door Thrown Open,” *USQR* 59 (2005) 1.

Major papers from this conference were subsequently published in 2005 in volume 59 of the *Union Seminary Quarterly Review (USQR)*, which was titled *New Testament and Roman Empire: Shifting Paradigms for Interpretation*.<sup>15</sup> In an introductory essay, the editors described the meeting this way:

Participants at this trans-disciplinary and multi-media meeting discussed a reconsideration of the Roman empire as the New Testament's socio-political context, examined the political resistance of early Christian communities, and considered and debated implications of reading the New Testament differently for resistance to imperial presumptions of twenty-first century American power.

We live in a context where the public face of New Testament interpretation is increasingly represented as either esoteric and irrelevant due to the perceived introspection of biblical scholars, or counter-productive to progressive theological praxis due to the dominance of right-wing Christian fundamentalist orientations. . . . [T]he call to resist complicity with empire in all areas is embedded in the most sacred and ancient of Christian scriptures.<sup>16</sup>

Contributors to this volume include several of the so-called "courageous pioneers" of this new scholarship: Richard Horsley, John Dominic Crossan, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Brigitte Kahl, and Warren Carter.<sup>17</sup> One of these pioneers, Richard Horsley, is perhaps best known for his watershed 1997 work *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*,<sup>18</sup> which is a collection of essays that brings together some of the cutting-edge scholarship concerning Paul, his letters, and his imperial context. But it is his little book on *Jesus and Empire* that gives perhaps the clearest expression of the political implications of his reading of Scripture. It is here that he tells how his reading of the Bible informs his interpretation of American empire and its role in the world. I quote at length:

[After World War II] the United States systematically built what can only, in retrospect, be called its own empire. American's reluctance about their empire came out most strongly of course in the movement against the Vietnam War, which seriously divided the country. Nevertheless, President Reagan soon had Americans "standing tall" again, with an unprecedented military buildup and forays into Grenada and Panama.

With the economic collapse of the Soviet Union, many Americans proudly claimed that the United States had "won" the Cold War. America emerged as

<sup>15</sup> *USQR* 59/3–4 (2005).

<sup>16</sup> "Editorial Statement," *USQR* 59 (2005) vii.

<sup>17</sup> Richard A. Horsley, "Jesus and Empire," *USQR* 59 (2005) 44–74; J. D. Crossan, "Paul and Rome: The Challenge of a Just World Order," *USQR* 59/3–4 (2005) 6–20; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Empire and Christian Testament Studies," *USQR* 59/3–4 (2005) 131–39; Warren Carter, "Matthew and Empire," *USQR* 59 (2005) 86–91; Brigitte Kahl, "Reading Galatians and Empire at the Great Altar of Pergamon" *USQR* 59 (2005) 21–43.

<sup>18</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997). Richard Horsley, Distinguished Professor at the University of Massachusetts Boston, is the driving force behind the "Paul and Politics" group at the Society of Biblical Literature and has edited three other significant collections of essays. The first is *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000); the second *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004); and the third is *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

the only remaining superpower. . . . Under another President George (W.) Bush, the U.S. government made dramatic moves to indicate that it would no longer abide by previous international agreements but would act unilaterally. After all, it was the sole superpower.

After September 11, 2001, however . . . Americans experienced a rude awakening to the new world *disorder*. . . .

Many Americans also began to ask, "Why do they hate us so?" And that led to the painful recognition that not just Arab/Muslim people but many others as well had already been asking a corresponding question: Why do Americans hate us so? The United States killed hundreds of thousands of civilians in the bombing of Baghdad in Desert Storm. America caused the death of a half million infants and children through the sanctions against Iraq that denied them needed medicines and adequate health care. The United States, an ostensibly Christian country, violates the holy ground of Islam in basing military forces in Saudi Arabia, forces that also prop up the unpopular Saudi regime that oppresses its own people. And, say Muslims and other Arabs, America sides with Israel in oppression of the Palestinians. Before all this, the United States dropped napalm and antipersonnel bombs from the sky on the Vietnamese people, and trained the Latin American militaries that oppressed and often massacred their own peoples.

More generally, the United States consumes a huge percentage of the world's resources, including fossil fuels for SUV's, and then refuses to go along with the Kyoto treaty to slow down global warming that threatens life on the planet. Now global capitalism, which is not identical with but is centered in the United States, effectively controls the economy of nearly every country in the world, to many peoples' detriment. Even if one believes that the power that really controls the world is now global capitalism, it appears that in the twentieth century the United States became the heir of the world empire and now, as the only remaining superpower, indeed stands at the apex of a new world order. . . .

The United States would have a hard time convincing the world that it is still practicing republican virtue. Given the United States' behavior in the world, it would be difficult for Americans to claim that they are still a biblical people who hold liberation and covenantal justice as core values and commitments. Indeed, many Americans cannot avoid the awkward feeling that they are now more analogous to imperial Rome than they are to the ancient Middle Eastern people who celebrated their origins in God's liberation from harsh service to a foreign ruler. . . .<sup>19</sup>

Here Horsley describes an American cultural context that is in captivity to the ideology of empire. What Horsley and others argue is that by and large the whole of Western Christendom has been captivated by this perverted ideology and has subsequently missed the Bible's counter-imperial message. It is for this reason that Hal Taussig praises "the emergence of this new field of study" and laments that Christians have missed the counter-imperial message of the Bible throughout the millennia. He writes,

How New Testament scholarship, most Christian interpretation over the last millennium, and countless assemblies of worship and research could have missed the contrast with Roman imperial power at the heart of early Christianity

<sup>19</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and Empire* 3–5.

defies imagination. One can only account for this unbelievable ignorance as a haunting tribute to the power of denial and the complicity of Christendom in imperial domination over the past 1,200 years.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, centuries of pro-imperial prejudice have suffocated the truly counter-imperial message of Paul. Here Taussig effectively puts into the dock the entire history of Western interpretation of Paul's letters.<sup>21</sup>

In light of such sweeping claims, evangelicals who are concerned to see the Bible's authoritative message faithfully translated and applied to all areas of life will want to evaluate carefully the aims of the FP. The question, therefore, that I want to consider in the next section of this essay is this: Does this FP on Paul provide evangelicals a helpful approach to understanding the Pauline witness in his 13 NT letters?<sup>22</sup> Are the analogies between America and Rome helpful in bringing the biblical witness to bear upon contemporary world politics? What I hope to show is that the counter-imperial interpretations of Paul are motivated not merely by a "fresh" and more accurate understanding of his letters but also by the desire of some to find in Paul an endorsement of their own political and cultural biases. I suggest that while evangelicals may debate the pro's and con's of empires, this *eisegetical* hermeneutic does not produce a better understanding of Paul or a more faithful application of his message. Regardless of how one evaluates the historical claims of the fresh perspective, reading a counter-imperial (and thus anti-American) bias into Paul's gospel is not a helpful way for evangelicals to approach Paul's letters.

### III. EVALUATING THE FRESH PERSPECTIVE

That being said, it would be an error to dismiss outright all of the scholarship adduced by counter-imperial approaches to Paul's writings. Our knowl-

<sup>20</sup> Hal Taussig, "Prologue: A Door Thrown Open," *USQR* 59 (2005) 2: "This volume . . . means to mark a break with New Testament scholarship's complicity with the imperial and imperious cultural domination of the West."

<sup>21</sup> We have to question whether that last 1,200 years of Pauline interpretation has really been as unenlightened as Taussig alleges. Is it not possible that no one has read the Scriptures in this way because this new way of interpretation marks an innovation that the authors of the Scriptures did not intend? Ironically, to foreclose that kind of possibility sounds like the kind of imperial power play that scholars often use when they desire to disenfranchise what G. K. Chesterton called the "democracy of the dead" (G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* [New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1908] 64–65). Not every new idea is a good one, nor is bowing to the latest fad in biblical criticism.

<sup>22</sup> I recognize that some readers will not grant that the thirteen canonical letters bearing Paul's name are actually authentic. Nevertheless, I believe that there are good reasons to believe that the apostle Paul wrote all thirteen. But defending that thesis is well beyond the purview of this essay. So I beg the reader's indulgence on this point. For the purposes of this essay, I will follow the lead Thomas R. Schreiner provides in his Pauline theology: "I do not argue the case for authenticity in my theology; instead I refer the readers to others who have made the case effectively. The Pauline theology offered here is distinctive in that all thirteen letters ascribed to Paul are mined to decipher his theology" (*Paul Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001] 10). Commentators who have ably defended the authenticity of the Pastoral Epistles include J. N. D. Kelly, Joachim Jeremias, Donald Guthrie, Gordon Fee, George Knight III, Philip H. Towner, Luke Timothy Johnson, William Mounce, and Thomas C. Oden.

edge of the Roman Empire in the first century and consequently our understanding of the historical backdrop of Paul's letters and mission have been greatly enhanced by this scholarship. This contribution has value for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, not every historical insight has led to commensurate insight into the interpretation of Paul's epistles. Sometimes the agenda to achieve a "political" reading of Paul domesticates what Paul really said by forcing him onto a Procrustean bed of political ideology. When this happens, the message of the great apostle to the Gentiles gets sidelined. So while I hope to affirm the best of the FP's historical insights, the following evaluation will urge some caution with respect to the way those insights have been applied to the interpretation of Paul's letters. These cautions do not apply equally to every scholar who has contributed to the literature in this field. But they are a relevant critique to some of the broad currents appearing in this field of study. I will illustrate some of these trends with representative examples from the literature.

1. *Caution about the use of parallels.* Biblical scholars have been chastened in their use of parallels for over forty years now by a little article by Samuel Sandmel entitled "Parallelomania."<sup>23</sup> Sandmel warns against the "extravagance" of biblical scholars which first overemphasizes the alleged similarity of passages to establish "parallels" with the Bible and then seeks to describe the significance of those parallels as if they implied some necessary literary connection.<sup>24</sup> Sandmel's warning applies in the present case in at least one important way. FP readings of Paul rely heavily on verbal parallels between Paul's letters and the Caesar cult.<sup>25</sup> While verbal parallels certainly exist between Paul's vocabulary and that of the imperial cult, the careful exegete will exercise caution in assessing the significance of those parallels. This warning should be heeded especially where Paul's vocabulary overlaps with both the imperial cult and the LXX. The tendency in FP exegesis is to identify such parallels and to assume almost automatically that they constitute evidence of some formal (perhaps literary) connection, implying that Paul deliberately chooses such terms in order to subvert the ideology of emperor worship. This procedure is problematic because the

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962) 1–13. See also the related essay by T. L. Donaldson, "Parallels: Use, Misuse and Limitations," *EvQ* 55 (1983) 193–210.

<sup>24</sup> We must note that not all of the FP's alleged parallels are between Paul and literary sources. See, e.g., John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom: A New Vision of Paul's Words & World* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004), which draws heavily from archeological discoveries. Nevertheless, the application of Sandmel's principle still applies.

<sup>25</sup> Horsley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* 140–41: "The starting point in recognizing that Paul was preaching an anti-imperial gospel is that much of his key language would have evoked echoes of the imperial cult and ideology. . . . Insofar as Paul deliberately used language closely associated with the imperial religion, he was presenting his gospel as a direct competitor of the gospel of Caesar. . . . Paul's borrowing from and allusions to language central to the imperial cult and ideology reveal and dramatize just how anti-imperial his own gospel was."

assessment of the significance of the parallels is subject to being pre-determined by an agenda to have a “political” reading of Paul, rather than by paying close attention to what Paul is actually saying.<sup>26</sup> A reader is scarcely in a position to offer an objective evaluation of such parallels when his or her interpretation is being dictated by the conscious intention to challenge “conservative” readings of Paul.<sup>27</sup>

The examples of this kind of use of parallels are too numerous to reproduce here,<sup>28</sup> so I select only a few by way of illustration. Note first of all J. R. Harrison’s 2002 article in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, “Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki.”<sup>29</sup> Harrison observes that the term κύριος was used from the time of Augustus onwards as an honorific term for the Caesars in the imperial cult.<sup>30</sup> Thus, for Paul to call Jesus κύριος<sup>31</sup> meant that he was saying that Caesar is not κύριος. Such a claim would have provoked a hostile response from subjects who may have been required to take a loyalty oath to Caesar.<sup>32</sup> In this way, Harrison identifies several other key terms in the Thessalonian epistles that have parallels in both Jewish apocalyptic literature and the imperial cult: παρουσία and ἐπιφάνεια (1 Thess 4:15; 2 Thess 2:8); ἀπάντησις (1 Thess 4:17); εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια (1 Thess 5:3); σωτηρία and ἐλπὶς (1 Thess 5:8–9). Paul’s use of each of them (it is argued) constitutes a critique of the imperial propaganda of his day.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>26</sup> D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo’s caution about using backgrounds in general is instructive: “Apparent parallels to New Testament texts may so domesticate those texts that the meaning of the ‘parallel’ is read back into the New Testament, making it impossible to hear what the New Testament is actually saying. . . . Sometimes the nature of the ostensible background is itself disputed, and in any case, it should not be allowed to control the exegesis of the New Testament. The first obligation of the interpreter of the New Testament is to try to understand the thoughts of these documents on their own terms” (*An Introduction to the New Testament* [2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005] 68–69).

<sup>27</sup> According to Richard Horsley, the SBL’s “Paul and Politics” group is composed of “those ready to contest the standard interpretation of Paul as a social-political conservative strictly obedient to the empire of which he was supposedly a citizen” (“Introduction: Krister Stendahl’s Challenge to Pauline Studies,” in *Paul and Politics* 11).

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul* 11: “Christians must have understood, then, that to proclaim Jesus as Son of God was deliberately denying Caesar is highest title and that to announce Jesus as Lord and Savior was calculated treason.”

<sup>29</sup> J. R. Harrison, “Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki,” *JSNT* 25 (2002) 71–96.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 78.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Thess 1:1, 3, 6, 8; 2:15, 19; 3:8, 11, 12, 13; 4:1, 2, 6, 15, 16, 17; 5:2, 9, 12, 23, 27, 28.

<sup>32</sup> Harrison observes that the people of Aritium swore the following loyalty oath to the emperor Caligula just thirteen years before 1 Thessalonians was written: “On my conscience, I shall be an enemy of those persons whom I know to be enemies of Gaius Caesar Germanicus, and if anyone imperils or shall imperil him or his safety by arms or civil war I shall not cease to hunt him down by land and by sea, until he pays the penalty to Caesar in full. I shall not hold myself or my children dearer than his safety and I shall consider as my enemies those persons who are hostile to him. If consciously I swear falsely or am proved false may Jupiter Optimus Maximus and the deified Augustus and all the other immortal gods punish me and my children with loss of country, safety, and all my fortune” (*CIL* II 172, quoted in J. R. Harrison, “Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki” 80).

<sup>33</sup> Harrison, “Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki” 82–88.

Of course, there is little doubt that Harrison has identified legitimate parallels between Paul and the emperor cult. But it is his assessment of the value of those parallels that is the question. To what extent are the parallels due merely to the fact that Paul and the imperial cult were drawing from the common stock of Koine Greek, the *lingua franca* of the eastern part of the Roman Empire? Is it not possible that terms such as these would have been utilized by almost any religion drawing from the Greek language? Harrison himself acknowledges that the use of κύριος was not an innovation of the imperial cult, but rather that the imperial cult had appropriated the term from “the eastern ruler cult.”<sup>34</sup> To some extent, therefore, we cannot rule out the possibility that some parallels are due to the fact that different movements are grabbing theopolitical language from the same linguistic bag.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, it is manifestly clear that Paul’s selection of terms is driven in large part by his interface with the LXX Scriptures. With respect to κύριος in particular, Paul’s primary motivation for using this term would have been his desire to link Messiah Jesus with the “Lord” of the Greek OT, where the divine name “Yahweh” is frequently rendered as κύριος.<sup>36</sup> These observations should at least give us pause before concluding too quickly that Paul was trolling around Greco-Roman cults in order to find linguistic grist for his Christology.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to Harrison, note also N. T. Wright’s approach, which is more nuanced than many counter-imperial interpreters of Paul. Wright, along with other proponents of the FP, justifies reading Paul in light of parallels in the imperial cult because of the pervasiveness of that cult in Paul’s missionary context. Wright observes that the emperor cult provided a religious basis for the imperial power of the Rome; it was a monolithic ideology that resulted in the consolidation of Rome’s political power over the peoples and realms

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>35</sup> I was drawn to this observation after reading D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo’s reluctance about extra-biblical parallels with the fourth Gospel: “One reason why interpreters are able to find parallels to John in so diverse an array of literature lies in John’s vocabulary and pithy sayings. Words such as light, darkness, life, death, spirit, word, love, believing, water, bread, clean, birth, and children of God can be found in almost any religion. Frequently they have very different referents as one moves from religion to religion, but the vocabulary is as popular as religion itself” (*Introduction to the New Testament* 256). Note also T. L. Donaldson, “Parallels: Use, Misuse and Limitations” *EvQ* 55 (1983) 195: “There are also unrelated analogical parallels, which owe their similarities only to common human reactions to similar religious conditions.”

<sup>36</sup> BDAG, s.v. κύριος, 2.b. Paul quotes uses of κύριος from the LXX Scriptures and applies them to Jesus Christ (e.g. Rom 10:13 quoting Joel 3:5; 1 Cor 1:31 quoting Jer 9:22–23; Phil 2:10 alluding to Is 45:23). Cf. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire” 169: “It is quite clear in several passages that, when Paul ascribes Lordship to Jesus, using the word *kyrios*, he has in mind very specifically the Septuagintal use of the word to stand for the unsayable Tetragrammaton, YHWH. Again and again Paul quotes biblical passages in which ‘the Lord’ is indubitably YHWH, but of which, for him, the subject is now indisputably Jesus.” See also N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Acts-First Corinthians, Vol. 10* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 419.

<sup>37</sup> This last sentence is not an overstatement. As pointed out above, Horsley has said that the “starting point” for counter-imperial readings of Paul is the recognition that Paul “deliberately” borrows language from the imperial cult (*Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* 140).

that it subjugated. Wright argues that the theopolitical ideology of the imperial cult was “the means (as opposed to overt large-scale military presence) whereby the Romans managed to control and govern such huge areas as came under their sway.”<sup>38</sup>

Wright’s sundry writings on this topic differ from other counter-imperial readers in that he emphasizes that Paul’s background in Judaism must not be overlooked in the attempt to identify parallels in the imperial cult. In fact, Wright observes the same tendency towards “parallelomania” that I have identified above. But Wright aims Sandmel’s critique squarely at Horsley’s 1997 volume *Paul and Empire*, saying that many of the contributors have followed “the quite misleading method of study whereby the classical world is combed for parallels to Paul which are then used to ‘explain him.’”<sup>39</sup> Wright goes on to argue that Paul’s background in both Judaism and his interface with Greco-Roman society must be given their due: “Paul’s own self-understanding speaks of radical innovation from within a tradition [Judaism], and of radical head-on confrontation with other traditions [Greco-Roman world].”

This strategy of acknowledging both the Jewish and Greco-Roman backdrop of Paul’s writings informs Wright’s counter-imperial interpretations. For example, Wright insists that Paul’s use of “gospel” terminology (εὐαγγέλιον, εὐαγγελίζομαι) is due to Paul’s background in Judaism and to his wish to confront the Roman empire. Paul preached the “gospel” as a fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures (Isaiah 40 and 52) and as a “coded” challenge to Rome: “The more Jewish we make Paul’s ‘gospel’, the more it confronts directly the pretensions of the Imperial cult, and indeed all other paganisms whether ‘religious’ or ‘secular.’”<sup>40</sup>

Even though Wright insists on setting Paul against both backdrops, he nonetheless employs the same procedure as the others in his use of parallels. Wright argues that within the imperial cult the emperor was worshipped as the “son of god” and “savior” who brings “peace” to the empire, the announcement of which is called “good news” or “gospel.” For Wright, when Paul uses

<sup>38</sup> E.g. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire” 161: “The cult of Caesar, so far from being one new religion among many in the Roman world, had already by the time of Paul’s missionary activity become not only the dominant cult in a large part of the empire . . . but was actually the means (as opposed to overt large-scale military presence) whereby the Romans managed to control and govern such huge areas as came under their sway.” Likewise, Richard Horsley, “Introduction,” in *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (ed. Richard Horsley; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004) 16: “The most important and effective way that the urban and provincial oligarchies constructed and maintained the Roman imperial order was their sponsorship of the imperial cult.” See also Richard Horsley, “The Gospel of Imperial Salvation: Introduction,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997) 11.

<sup>39</sup> Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire” 162.

<sup>40</sup> N. T. Wright, “Gospel and Theology in Galatians,” in *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker* (ed. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson; JSNTSup 108; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 228. The same thesis reemerges here and there in Wright’s subsequent writings.

such terminology in his writings, it represents an intentional subversion of the religious and political claims of the Roman Empire. Paul draws from Roman imperial rhetoric, so that he can set the claims of King Jesus against it. Thus Paul's gospel is not only a religious message about salvation from death and sin, but a political message with counter-imperial messages embedded and "encoded" in it.

To be sure, N. T. Wright has a more balanced approach in his use of parallels; he always keeps Paul's Jewish roots in the foreground of his discussion. Yet many FP proponents seem to be at odds with Wright on this point and are eschewing some of the helpful things that have been learned from the "New Perspective"—namely, that Paul is best understood against the backdrop of Second Temple Judaism. Richard Horsley has been very direct about his intention to break with the New Perspective in this regard, saying that

The "new perspective" . . . was not a major "paradigm shift," for it perpetuated the established theological view that Paul was focused primarily on his new religion of Christianity over against his previous religion of Judaism. In the most quoted statement of the "new perspective": ". . . *this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity.*" The issues of the law, sin, righteousness, and faith in their "Christian" versus their "Jewish" configuration remain at the center of discussion, with the corresponding focus on the epistles to the Galatians and Romans. . . . Recent recognition that equally prominent Pauline terms such as "gospel," "the cross/crucified," "salvation," and perhaps even "faith" were borrowed from and stand over against Roman imperial ideology suggests a reexamination of what it is that Paul is against primarily. . . . [D]oes he stand primarily over against "Judaism"?<sup>41</sup>

But again, we return to the difficulties in reading Paul in the way Horsley proposes. Paul's explicit and implicit allusions to the Septuagint stand as *prima facie* evidence that Paul's theological lexicon was shaped primarily by Judaism. Not only are Paul's conspicuous quotations of the LXX obvious throughout his writings, but Richard Hays has given us criteria by which we can see that Paul's letters are riddled with "echoes" of the OT as well—that is, implicit but clear allusions to the OT Scriptures.<sup>42</sup> In light of Paul's explicit allusions to the OT, who could be blamed for concluding that Paul's theological lexicon finds its origin in the Judaism in which he was so deeply embedded? Wright's both/and approach to the use of Jewish and Greco-Roman backgrounds is certainly preferable to those who overemphasize Paul's Greco-Roman context in their exegesis. Nevertheless, in both cases the careful exegete will exercise caution not to predetermine the significance of those parallels based on a desire to have a "political" reading of Paul.

2. *Caution about the distinction between meaning and implication.* E. D. Hirsch observed an important hermeneutical distinction that is often overlooked by FP exegetes—the distinction between meaning and implication.

<sup>41</sup> Horsley, "General Introduction," in *Paul and Empire* 5–6.

<sup>42</sup> See Richard Hays's criteria for ascertaining Pauline "echoes" of OT Scripture (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989]).

For Hirsch, verbal meaning is what an author has consciously willed to convey through the linguistic signs he uses and which can be conveyed (shared) by those linguistic signs.<sup>43</sup> An implication, however, differs in that it is not a part of the author's conscious intention, even though it is established by a type that derives from the author's willed meaning.<sup>44</sup>

The importance of this distinction is critical in the application of historical backgrounds to the task of exegesis. In the present case, we must distinguish what Paul willed to convey through the words he used from the implications that derive from his meaning. Many times what FP proponents assign to Paul's meaning in actuality belongs to the implications of his meaning. We can illustrate the need for such a distinction from a passage in N. T. Wright's essay "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire":

For Paul "the gospel" is . . . the thoroughly Jewish (and indeed Isaianic) message that challenges the royal and imperial messages abroad in Paul's world. It is not difficult to see how this "gospel" functions for Paul. Theologically, it belongs completely with Isaiah's ringing monotheistic affirmations that YHWH and YHWH alone is the true god, the only creator, the only sovereign of the world. . . . Politically, it cannot but have been heard as a summons to allegiance to "another king."<sup>45</sup>

Notice what Wright has done in this passage. He shows that Paul's "gospel" is deeply rooted in Isaianic theology. The Lordship of Christ as a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy belongs to Paul's meaning. Yet Wright attributes how this message was "heard" as a part of his meaning as well. Since Paul's first audience would have been steeped in the propaganda of the imperial cult, they no doubt would have been confronted by such a message. But to say that Paul selected his "gospel" terminology in order to bring that particular confrontation with Rome is not in any way explicit in the text.

An example from Wright's commentary on Romans will show how meaning and implication get confused in the task of exegesis. In particular, we highlight his comments on Rom 1:1–7, 16–17. As noted above, Wright has written extensively about the meaning of "gospel" (εὐαγγέλιον) in Paul's writings. In the book of Romans, Wright explains that the "gospel" has everything to do with announcing God's "covenant faithfulness" (Wright's rendering of δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ<sup>46</sup>) in and through Jesus the Messiah, the Davidic king who was promised to come in the OT. For Wright, both εὐαγγέλιον and δικαιοσύνη have parallels in the imperial context of his readers. Because εὐαγγέλιον

<sup>43</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) 31.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 61–67.

<sup>45</sup> Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire" 165.

<sup>46</sup> E.g. "Letter to the Romans" 403. On δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ in Rom 1:17, Wright argues that when δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ appears in biblical and post-biblical Jewish texts, "it always refers to God's own righteousness, not to status people have from God." Thus "the flow of thought through the letter as a whole makes far more sense if we understand the statement of the theme in 1:17 as being about God and God's covenant faithfulness and justice, rather than simply about justification."

was used in the announcement or accession of a pagan ruler or emperor<sup>47</sup> and because δικαιοσύνη was the Greek rendering of the Roman goddess *Iustitia*,<sup>48</sup> “Paul’s declaration that the gospel of King Jesus reveals God’s *dikaiosynē* must also be read as a deliberate challenge to the imperial pretension. If it is justice you want, he implies, you will find it, but not in the εὐαγγέλιον (*euangelion*) that announces Caesar as Lord, but in the *euangelion* of Jesus.”<sup>49</sup> Once again, Wright’s hermeneutical procedure is clear. He identifies parallels between Paul’s terms and those that were in use in the Roman imperial context of his readers. Paul’s *meaning* therefore is determined to some extent by the way the terms would have been used in Rome.

But it seems very likely that Wright has failed to distinguish Paul’s meaning from an implication that flows from that meaning. In Romans 1, Paul never mentions the goddess *Iustitia*, nor does he mention the “gospel” as a reference to the accession of pagan rulers or emperors. Paul himself does not direct his readers to define his terms according to their Greco-Roman context. On the contrary, he directs his readers to the OT background of his message. Paul writes that his “gospel” is something that was “promised beforehand through his prophets.” Paul says his “gospel” concerns God’s son who is “from the seed of David.” Furthermore, Paul links the righteousness of God (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) to Hab 2:4. In every way, Paul directs his readers to the OT as an explanation of his gospel, but never to the Roman imperial context of his readers. So why are we to assume that Paul intended his words to be defined by their use in the Roman imperial context? Merely citing the parallels does not establish the connection.

Wright assumes the connection because he thinks the announcement of Jesus and Lord would have been a challenge to “pagan pretensions.” Certainly he is correct in this. But unless Wright can establish (and not presume) the connection to the parallels in the Roman imperial context, we must assume that the challenge comes by way of implication, not by way of some conscious intention to mimic the language of imperial propaganda. Everywhere in Romans 1 and the rest of the epistle, Paul points his readers to the OT as the backdrop for his message. Is it not reasonable to conclude then that his gospel was counter-imperial by way of implication, not by way of his meaning?

That Paul may have had the confrontation with the Roman Empire in mind when employing εὐαγγέλιον and δικαιοσύνη is certainly not outside the realm of possibility. But neither is it unlikely that his meaning was a more generic announcement of the risen Christ’s Lordship over all—a sovereignty that would have included a subversion of the Roman empire among his original hearers and which would have included a subversion of every self-aggrandizing imperial pretension in every generation from his day until now. Yet the subversion in every case would have been by way of implication, not

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 415.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 404.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 404–5.

by way of Paul's intended meaning, which consisted of a declaration of Christ's universal Lordship over all.

Thus it is fallacious for FP interpreters to point to how Paul's hearers might have been confronted by his message and then to read the particulars of that confrontation back into Paul's original message. Does Paul narrowly target Roman imperial power in his use of the term κύριος? No doubt Paul's gospel implied a critique of the imperial pretensions of the Roman empire. After all, Paul confesses that every knee will one day bow and confess Jesus Christ as κύριος (Phil 2:11). Yet to say that Paul's *meaning* (that is, what he consciously intended to communicate by the words he used) includes such a confrontation is an altogether different matter.<sup>50</sup>

One of the problems that results from failing to see the distinction between meaning and implication is that it obscures the significance of Paul's normative teachings for the contemporary reader. If Paul is narrowly opposing Rome, then the implication for modern readers might be that the gospel narrowly opposes global empires. But this approach mistakes an implication for Paul's meaning and takes the teeth out of the real implications Paul's gospel has for every other kind of non-imperial power in the world that opposes Christ. The approach makes Rome (and thus America) the singular/ chief propagators of evil in the world. But this does not ring true with the wider implications of Paul's actual meaning. Paul says that the gospel stands against *all* rival powers of the present evil age—be they political entities or the demonic forces that back them (e.g. Col 2:10, 14). By implication, this means that the gospel has a prophetic rebuke for the geopolitically insignificant oppressors of Darfur, the one-child enforcers of China, and the *laissez faire* secularists of America. To single out Rome as Paul's target helps FP proponents to bring a "prophetic" rebuke to America, but it lets off the hook all the other powers of the world that Messiah Jesus intends to subjugate to his authority. The coming Kingdom of Christ will not only replace the so-called *pax Americana*, but also the totalizing regimes of Castro's Cuba and Chávez's Venezuela, who by some strange inconsistency do not receive much ire at all from proponents of the FP.

3. *Caution about the hermeneutics of the FP.* The failure to see the distinction between implication and meaning is not the only hermeneutical problem associated with the FP. One of the chief deficiencies of the FP is its varying applications of reader-response methodologies to the biblical text. This hermeneutic features rather prominently in the work of the Society of Biblical Literature's "Paul and Politics" group, an annual colloquium that has been perhaps the most significant forum and catalyst for counter-imperial readings of Paul.

<sup>50</sup> Douglas de Lacey, review of *Paul and Politics*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, in *Anvil* 19 (2002) 136: "There is a danger in the assumption that certain passages are 'about' political issues, at least as great as seeing them as 'about' faith."

Major papers from the first four years of the “Paul and Politics” group were published in 2000 in a *Festschrift* for Krister Stendahl entitled *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* edited by Richard Horsley.<sup>51</sup> In the introduction, Horsley describes what the impetus was for forming the “Paul and Politics” group. He says that a growing number of NT scholars had become disenchanted with the published papers of SBL’s Pauline Theology group, charging that “one looks in vain [in those writings] for voices that vary from the European-American, predominantly male Protestant viewpoint.”<sup>52</sup> That is why Horsley has written elsewhere that, “‘Critical’ NT studies developed not only during the heyday of western European imperialism but as one of many academic disciplines in complicity with it.”<sup>53</sup> Consequently, the point of the “Paul and Politics” group was to rescue Paul from the clutches of colonial interpreters who had used Paul to dominate and subjugate innumerable peoples in the world. Thus the “Paul and Politics” group became a place where voices from the “two-thirds world” can finally be heard, along with those in the Western world who share their concerns.<sup>54</sup>

These postcolonial readers of Paul have not been going at it alone. Horsley writes that “[p]ioneers of postcolonial criticism are from the outset also seeking to make alliances with those subjected to and seeking liberation from sexual, racial, colonial, and class domination.”<sup>55</sup> Hence feminists, Jewish people, colonized peoples, liberationists, and all others who have ever felt subjugated by a totalizing power have a stake in the work of the “Paul and Politics” group. In this respect, it is worth quoting Horsley at length:

The Paul and Politics Group was formed precisely to provide such a forum for what were separate but often overlapping lines of criticism of Paul’s mission, letters, and longer-range impact that challenged standard views: that is, both African Americans who dismiss Paul because Pauline letters figured so prominently in support of slavery and African Americans [*sic*] interpreters who argue that a critically reinterpreted Paul can still be a resource for liberation; a spectrum of feminist interpreters with varying degrees of criticism of Paul’s subordination of women; Jewish and other critics of Paul’s role in the separation of “Christianity” from “Judaism” and the Pauline contribution to anti-Judaism; interpreters from previously colonized peoples concerned about Pauline contribution to continuing “colonial” attitudes; and those ready to contest the standard interpretation of Paul as a social-political conservative strictly obedient to the empire of which he was supposedly a citizen.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> Richard Horsley, “Introduction: Krister Stendahl’s Challenge to Pauline Studies,” in *Paul and Politics* 5–6.

<sup>53</sup> Horsley, “Introduction,” in *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* 23.

<sup>54</sup> Horsley, “Introduction: Krister Stendahl’s Challenge to Pauline Studies,” in *Paul and Politics* 10.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

Notice Horsley's focus on *kinds of readers* who have experiences that predispose them against the "standard interpretation of Paul as a social-political conservative." This observation is crucial because it gets at the heart of the reader-response approach to Paul's writings. For Horsley and many of his colleagues, the reader and his experiences are every bit as important as the text being read in the work of interpretation. Horsley writes, "Both texts and interpreters occupy particular social locations and contexts. Analysis of contexts (both of text and interpreter) is therefore as important as analysis of text."<sup>57</sup>

Thus many counter-imperial readers of Paul favor an approach to interpretation that effectively diminishes the role of the author of the text. The interpretive agenda is announced at the outset and thereby diminishes the authoritative voice speaking in the biblical text. In this case, the agenda requires that Paul must decrease so that the interpreter might increase.<sup>58</sup> Horsley writes,

The aims and agenda of the Paul and Politics group are, broadly, to problematize, interrogate, and re-vision Pauline texts and interpretations, to identify oppressive formulations as well as potentially liberative visions and values in order to recover their unfulfilled historical possibilities, all in critical mutual engagement among diverse participants. . . . All interpretation has an agenda. Critical awareness means making a choice to exercise criticism on the side of the marginalized and oppressed and with demystification and liberation in mind.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

<sup>58</sup> "It was not until the 1960s and 70s that the reader-response approach came into prominence. Whereas once the sun, as portrayed by Ptolemy, was thought to revolve around the earth and the earth was thought to be the center of the universe, later under Copernicus the earth was seen as rotating around the sun. Now this new revolution understood all of the universe and reality as rotating around the individual. The reader was no longer seen as part of the universe and seeking its meaning but as the center of the universe and imparting meaning to it" (Robert H. Stein, "The Benefits of an Author-Oriented Approach to Hermeneutics," *JETS* 44 [2001] 454).

<sup>59</sup> Horsley, "Introduction: Krister Stendahl's Challenge to Pauline Studies" 15. Consider also the deconstructive, feminist reading strategy described by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Rhetoricity of Historical Knowledge," in *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World: Essays Honoring Dieter Georgi* (ed. Lukas Bormann, Kelly Del Tredici, and Angela Standhartinger; NovTSup; Leiden; New York: E. J. Brill, 1994) 459–60: "If readers understand language not as a closed linguistic system but as a social convention and communicative tool, they can become accountable for their own readings which they negotiate and create in specific contexts and situations. For instance, in their interaction with a Pauline textual convention such as the masculine address "brothers," readers must decide how to read this androcentric appellation. Whether they read this expression in a generic or in a gender specific way depends both on their judgment of Paul's specific linguistic and social contexts and on their own social experience and ideological interests. If language is not a straitjacket into which our thoughts must be forced, that is, if it is not a naturalized closed system but rather a medium which is affected by social conditions and which changes in response to social changes, then writing, translation, and interpretation become the sites of the struggle for change." See also Fiorenza's "The Practice of Biblical Interpretation: Luke 10:38–42," in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (ed. Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley; rev. ed.; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; London: SPCK, 1993) 172–97; Richard A. Horsley, "Liberating Narrative and Liberating Understanding: The Christmas Story," in *The Bible and Liberation* 154–71.

It is not difficult to see from this quote how the reader's agenda (rejecting "oppressive" interpretations in favor of "liberative" ones) might skew the assessment of textual meaning where Paul might have something moderately positive to say about Roman authority (e.g. Romans 13, which is discussed in detail below). The point to be made here is that a reader-oriented hermeneutic inevitably subjects Paul's message to distortion. For this reason, evangelicals should be concerned about any approach to reading the Scripture that removes the author as the ground and focus of textual meaning. From Reformers like Calvin and Luther<sup>60</sup> to the adherents of Hirsch or Vanhoozer<sup>61</sup> in the present, evangelicals have preferred to ground their interpretations in the intended meaning of the authors, not in the shifting opinions and deconstructions of the reader. This is not to say that evangelicals think themselves immune to their own biases and contexts in their reading of texts.<sup>62</sup> But it is to say that evangelicals have sought to conserve the authority of the Bible by identifying the author's intention as the goal of the interpretive task (*exegesis*), not by reading their own presuppositions, agendas, and biases into the text (*eisegesis*).

Unfortunately, the interpretive agenda of FP proponents is often *eisegetically* read into the Pauline texts that they are studying. We have already seen how this agenda affects the assessment of parallels, but we shall also see how the agenda precludes interpretations of Paul as a social-political conservative obedient to the Roman Empire (per Romans 13:1–7). This sad result is inevitable, given the stated hermeneutical assumptions. Even N. T. Wright has noticed this tendency among counterimperial interpreters. Wright says, "There is a danger—and I think Horsley and his colleagues have not always avoided it—of ignoring the major theological themes in Paul and simply plundering parts of his writings to find help in addressing the political concerns of the contemporary western world."<sup>63</sup> In other words, Wright himself acknowledges the tendency of those in the "Paul and Politics" group to read Paul's letters selectively in order to confirm this or that political bias.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005) 73; cf. 135.

<sup>61</sup> Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* 8, 30: "Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. . . . Verbal meaning is whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs." Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 201–65.

<sup>62</sup> E.g. note the "critical realism" of D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 110, 116–20.

<sup>63</sup> N. T. Wright, "A Fresh Perspective on Paul," *BJRL* 83 (2001) 28.

<sup>64</sup> Even though Wright points out this shortcoming in the exegesis of Horsley and others, I do not think that he is entirely innocent of this charge himself. To be sure, Wright's hermeneutic is not a reader-response approach nor is it that of the post-modern deconstructionist. On the contrary, he is very clear that he seeks to read the Bible with a "literal" hermeneutic—that is, one

Here again, there is the danger of identifying the significance of the parallels according to predetermined agenda to have a political reading of Paul.

4. *Caution about a narrow application to the Roman Empire.* As we have seen, proponents of the FP view the rapid growth of the emperor cult in Greece and Asia Minor in the first century as the hermeneutical backdrop for the interpretation of Paul's letters.<sup>65</sup> Yet I would suggest that this observation likely does not yield the interpretive cache that they allege. To say that the Caesar cult was the fastest-growing religion in the areas of Paul's mission<sup>66</sup> should not obscure the fact that other varieties of paganism still existed among the Gentiles to whom Paul ministered. N. T. Wright concedes this point in his FP essay when he says,

The religious world of the day was of course thoroughly pluralistic, and there was no expectation that this new cult would displace, or itself be threatened by, the traditional greco-roman religions in all their variety. Indeed, frequently the two were combined, as demonstrated by statues of the Emperor in the guise of Jupiter or another well-known god.<sup>67</sup>

This is no small point because in the Second Temple Jewish worldview in which Paul's gospel is rooted, it matters little whether the dominant religious form is this or that variety of emperor worship or paganism. Paul, in concert with Second Temple Judaism,<sup>68</sup> means to oppose all the powers with the Lordship of Christ, be they Roman Emperors or Greco-Roman "deities" (cf. 1 Cor 10:14–23), both of which persisted in Paul's missionary context. To single out the emperor cult as Paul's target probably particularizes too much

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that seeks to uncover the author's intended meaning. This is one of the positive features of N. T. Wright's recent short work on biblical authority *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*. In this book, Wright advocates an author-centered hermeneutic and says that Scripture must be interpreted in its "literal" sense in order for its authority to be realized in the life of the church. By "literal" sense, Wright means what the Reformers meant, "the sense that the first writers intended" (ibid. 73; cf. 135). Thus, for Wright, the work of grammatical-historical exegesis is of utmost importance (ibid. 112). For a fuller evaluation, see Denny Burk, review of *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*, by N. T. Wright, *JETS* 49 (2006) 622–25. Nevertheless, one cannot help but wonder if the interpretive agenda (to have a "political" reading of Paul) predetermines his assessment of parallels with the imperial cult.

<sup>65</sup> Horsley, "General Introduction," in *Paul and Empire* 4: "Recent studies by classical historians and archeologists, however, find that honors and festivals for the emperor were not only widespread but pervaded public life, particularly in the cities of Greece and Asia Minor, the very area of Paul's mission." Idem., "The Gospel of Imperial Salvation: Introduction," in *Paul and Empire* 13: "The dominant interest in this collection of essays is how Roman imperial power relations were constituted by the combination of emperor cult and patronage networks in Greece and Asia Minor, and thus formed the principal conditions of Paul's mission."

<sup>66</sup> N. T. Wright says that the "Caesar-cult was fast-growing, highly visible, and powerful" in the areas of Paul's mission: Greece, Asia Minor, and the Middle East ("A Fresh Perspective on Paul?," *BJRL* 83 [2001] 23).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> N. T. Wright agrees, saying that Paul's gospel is "a Christian variation on regular second-Temple Jewish stories, confronting, as many such stories did, the world of paganism" (ibid. 29).

what Paul intended to be a universal opposition to every power or speculation raised up against the knowledge of God (2 Cor 10:5). This observation makes Paul's so-called "coded" anti-imperial messages look all the more tendentious. Perhaps there was no "code" at all, and maybe Paul used more generic terminology because he wanted to oppose all the powers, not just Rome's empire narrowly conceived (e.g. Col 2:10, 15).

5. *Caution about the FP's view of the nature of Scripture.* Many counter-imperial readings of Paul do not give due weight to the so-called disputed letters of Paul. Neil Elliot, for example, has argued that the pseudepigraphal Pauline letters actually intend to "manage, or hijack the authority of Paul's legacy" reflected in the undisputed letters of Paul. Elliot argues that the disputed letters actually lead us away from what the pure legacy of Paul is in letters such as Romans and Galatians. He even goes so far as to add a "criterion of dissimilarity" to the interpretation of Paul's letters. He argues that "unless clearly required by evidence from the genuine letters of Paul, we should practice a healthy skepticism toward any interpretation that serves to assimilate Paul's thought and praxis to the recognized purposes of the pseudo-Paulines."<sup>69</sup> The result of such a practice would be to recognize the differences, for instance, between the pseudo-Pauline *Haustafeln* and the more egalitarian sense of the undisputed Pauline letters, between the references to women's subordination in the disputed letters of Paul and to differing emphases in the authentic letters.<sup>70</sup>

Another example of this skepticism appears in the 2004 book *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* by John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed. One of the weaknesses of Crossan and Reed's case is that some of their critical assumptions are not argued for but are merely assumed as established. For instance, Crossan and Reed claim that the authentic Paul was thoroughly egalitarian, and that texts such as 1 Cor 14:33–36 are pseudo-Pauline "obliterations of female authority" that the authentic Paul actually supported.<sup>71</sup> Even though Gordon Fee<sup>72</sup> has argued that these verses are non-Pauline interpolations, the issue remains very much in dispute. But Crossan and Reed do not acknowledge this fact in *In Search of Paul*, even though their historical reconstruction relies in part upon it. Likewise, Crossan and Reed only acknowledge seven canonical letters to be authentically Pauline: Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon. According to Crossan and Reed, these authentic letters promote an equality among persons that is "the central claim of this book for Christianity itself." That equality was undermined by the so-called pseudo-Pauline letters such as 1 Timothy and Ephesians.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Elliot, "Paul and the Politics of Empire" 26.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul* xiii.

<sup>72</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 699–705. This view was recently popularized in Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005).

<sup>73</sup> Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul* xiii.

N. T. Wright's participation in this conversation is a needed counter-balance to some of the more radical, critical assumptions made by FP interpreters. In *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, he writes:

The argument recently advanced (in North America particularly) that Ephesians and Colossians are secondary *because they move away from confrontation with the Empire to collaboration with it* is frankly absurd. Much of the "new perspective" writing on Paul has simply assumed and carried on the critical decisions reached by the old perspective, without noticing that the new perspective itself calls several of them into question. . . . [T]here comes a time when the chess pieces have to be put back on the board so that the game may restart. I suggest that when it comes to the extent of the Pauline corpus we may have reached that time.<sup>74</sup>

I appreciate Wright's call for a reconsideration of these critical questions, and I look forward to his forthcoming volume on Paul, which I suspect will treat them more fully. In any case, he seems to represent a minority position among counterimperial readers of Paul.<sup>75</sup> Evangelicals should be wary of any approach that relies upon a supposition that Paul could not have written some of the canonical letters that bear his name.

6. *Caution about the analogy between America and Rome.* Proponents of the FP suggest that the empires of Rome and America are historically analogous, such that Paul's rebuke of the former implies a direct rebuke of the latter. But I question whether the empires of Rome and America are really so analogous. This question is especially relevant when we observe the contemporary debate among historical scholars over the definition of what an empire is. But regardless of how one defines "empire," it is hard to miss the glaring dissimilarities between the way Rome projected its empire upon the world and the way the America exercises its weighty influence in world politics. Even Richard Horsley acknowledges the difference between Rome and America in this regard:

The major difference between ancient Roman and modern American imperialism: their different forms of "globalization," that is, the differing ways that domination and exploitation are institutionally structured in the imperial power relations. Roman "globalization" was political. Military conquest made possible the economic exploitation that was low-level by modern standards. Modern American imperial power is primarily economic, structured by the capitalist system that has long since transcended American national borders and become global.<sup>76</sup>

In other words, according to Horsley, Rome expanded its imperial power primarily through military conquest, whereas America expands its domination through economic policies. Certainly everyone can concede that both

<sup>74</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 19.

<sup>75</sup> Another recent counter-imperial reading of Colossians that accepts Pauline authorship is Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).

<sup>76</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and Empire* 144.

ancient Rome and modern America represent the dominant geopolitical powers of their times. But does it really make sense to suggest a moral equivalence between oppressive military conquests (like those of Rome) and global capitalist economic policies (like those of America)? I am not suggesting that American economic policies have no moral component or that America is guiltless in the projection of its economic policies into the world. I am only suggesting that lining the Appian Way with crucified slaves is hardly the moral equivalent of lining the streets of foreign countries with outposts of American capitalism (like McDonald's, Coca Cola, etc.).

Tacitus puts a description of Rome's methods in the mouth of a chieftain named Calgacus, who says of the Romans, "To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire: they make a desolation and they call it peace."<sup>77</sup> When one studies the history of the Roman empire and observes exactly how it subjugated, enslaved, and killed the peoples of the lands it pacified, it hardly seems analogous to the way that America conducts itself in its interaction with the world. No one would argue that the United States is flawless in its foreign and economic policies, but one would also be hard pressed to make the comparison to the totalizing, militaristic, subjugating exploits of imperial Rome.

Faithful application of Scripture to the contemporary context requires some degree of analogy between the situation of the original audience and that of the modern reader. But it appears that term "empire" is diluted when it is applied to contemporary America. In their book *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*, Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat define "empire" this way: "Empires are totalizing by definition. . . . Empires are built on systemic centralizations of power and secured by structures of socioeconomic and military control. They are religiously legitimated by powerful myths that are sustained by a proliferation of imperial images that captivate the imagination of the population."<sup>78</sup> Yet this definition reads as if it were intentionally crafted to suggest an analogy between Rome and America. But the analogy does not really ring true upon careful reflection. Whereas Rome annexed territory with the goal of ruling that territory through a centralized Roman administration, America does not. This is no small difference! Walsh and Keesmaat's definition does not include this crucial difference and is so generic that it could apply to the very nations that they claim the United States is oppressing (such as pre-2003 Iraq).<sup>79</sup> We are not being faithful to history if we cannot recognize the considerable difference between the way in which Rome coercively annexed nations and their resources versus the way America conducts its non-colonial foreign policy. Rome and America may both be centers of concentrated military and economic power, but they are not analogous in the use of that power. One cannot help but wonder if a

<sup>77</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola* 30. Translated by M. Hutton, in *Tacitus in Five Volume*, vol. 1, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) 81.

<sup>78</sup> Walsh and Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed* 31.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 61, 166, 182.

predetermined political agenda (here, to oppose American capitalist policies) is driving the analogy.

7. *Caution about the interpretation of Romans 13:1–7.* One can imagine that a *prima facie* reading of Paul's exhortation to the Roman believers in Rom 13:1–7 might present an obstacle to the FP. After all, it is here that Paul calls the Roman "authorities" servants of God who are appointed by God to use their coercive power of the sword for good and for the punishment of the evildoer. On the face of it, it reads like Paul has a fairly sanguine attitude toward the Roman authorities. In his review of Horsley's *Paul and Empire*, Steven Friesen raises precisely this question: "If Paul was building a movement that was anti-imperial, how do we explain his positive appraisal of government in a letter written to the congregation(s) in Rome itself?"<sup>80</sup> So the question naturally arises, how do FP advocates fit Rom 13:1–7 into their paradigm? While it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine everything written by FP interpreters on this text, it will be useful nonetheless to survey and remark briefly on two recent commentaries by scholars who interpret Romans 13 in keeping with the basic thrusts of the FP, Robert Jewett and N. T. Wright. Both of these interpreters accept Rom 13:1–7 as authentically Pauline and reject theories claiming that some or all of these verses represent a non-Pauline interpolation.

a. *Robert Jewett.* Probably the more important of the two commentaries is Robert Jewett's massive new *Romans* written for the Hermeneia series.<sup>81</sup> Jewett's exposition relies heavily on his reconstruction of the events that gave occasion to the letter: tensions in the Roman community owing to the Edict of Claudius; believers in the Roman community who were members of the Roman bureaucracy and who were sympathetic to imperial interests; and Paul's own goal of raising support for his mission to Spain. According to Jewett, Paul had a reputation for being a troublemaker in his mission efforts, and this fact would have been an obstacle to Christians in Rome who also served in the Roman bureaucracy. So Paul affirmed the status of the Roman authorities as "servants of God" who were put in place by God. By encouraging subservience to the Roman authorities, Paul sought to ingratiate the Christian bureaucrats so that they would know that Rome had nothing to fear from his missionary efforts and so that they would in turn support his mission to Spain.<sup>82</sup> In the process of making this appeal, Paul nonethe-

<sup>80</sup> Steven Friesen, review of *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsely, *BAR* 25 (May–June 1999) 58. Friesen goes on to critique the fact that counter-imperial interpreters (such as Dieter Georgi and Neil Elliot) have disagreed with one another about how to fit Rom 13:1–7 with a counter-imperial interpretation of Paul's letters.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 794: "These particular bureaucrats, being Christian, would be responsive to the ethical rationale of praising the good and punishing the evil that Paul had developed in 12:9–21. Thus the aim of this diatribe is to support their vocational aims by urging subservience to their kind

less offers an implicit critique of imperial authority by saying that Roman authorities received their authority from God. Thus Jewett fits the entire pericope within the framework of the FP:

The God who grants authority to governmental agencies in Paul's argument is not Mars or Jupiter, as in the Roman civic cult; nor is he represented by the pantheon of Greco-Roman deities that had been assimilated into the civic cult since the time of Augustus. The God of whom Paul speaks here is the same as announced in chapter 1 whose righteousness was elaborated for the next twelve chapters; it is the God embodied in the crucified Christ that is in view here, which turns this passage into a massive act of political cooptation. If the Roman authorities had understood this argument, it would have been viewed as thoroughly subversive. That the Roman authorities were appointed by the God and Father of Jesus Christ turns the entire Roman civic cult on its head, exposing its suppression of the truth. . . . Nothing remains of the claim in Roman propaganda that its law-enforcement system was redemptive, producing a kind of messianic peace under the rule of the gods *Justia* and *Clementia*. . . . What remains is the simple fact of divine appointment, a matter justified not by virtue of the appointee but by the mysterious mind of God who elects whom she will as the agents of her purpose (9:14–33; 11:17–32). Submission to the governmental authorities is therefore an expression of respect not for the authorities themselves but for the crucified deity who stands behind them. That this argument would have had an appeal to Christian groups working within the Roman administration is self-evident.<sup>83</sup>

In this way, Jewett turns the whole section into an implicit critique of imperial power. As for the abiding significance of this text for a Christian conception of the state, Jewett says the text simply is not relevant. Jewett writes,

Romans 13:1–7 was not intended to create the foundation of a political ethic for all times and places in succeeding generations—a task for which it has proven to be singularly ill-suited. Believing himself to be a member of the end-time generation, Paul had no interest in the concerns that would later burden Christian ethics, and which continue to dominate the exegetical discussion. His goal was to appeal to the Roman audience as he conceived it, addressing their concerns in a manner that fit the occasion of his forthcoming visit.<sup>84</sup>

Jewett's exposition fits in with the FP in at least two ways: (1) it shows that Paul's real aim is to subvert the pagan ideology of the Roman Empire, and (2) it shows that since Paul's endorsement of the Roman authorities was primarily a fund-raising technique for his mission to Spain, we cannot assume

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of administration; if Paul can thereby attract their goodwill, they will cooperate with his mission project, which in some respects could be interpreted as evil by non-Christian Roman officials concerned about maintaining imperial interests in Spain. Paul hopes that for the Christian bureaucrats, such concerns can be overcome. In this diatribe, he places an effective argument at their service: he whose reputation as a subversive troublemaker was in fact an advocate of good public order, and his plans for the Spanish venture should, therefore, not be thwarted.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 789–90.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 786–87.

that he intended his words to be applicable to other governments at other times, much less to be applied to some kind of “just war” theory.<sup>85</sup>

What are we to make of Jewett’s approach? While his exposition is learned and helpful on many levels, at least two items are problematic. First, if Paul’s point were to “subvert” and “co-opt” the Roman authorities, he chose a rather roundabout way of saying it. In fact, it does not sound like that is his main point at all. Clearly, the setting is before the Neronian persecution, and so Paul speaks without the qualifications that one might expect if the Roman authorities were actually perpetrating the crimes against Christians that occurred in the latter years of Nero. Nevertheless, the text plainly states that the Roman authorities were put in place by God and that when they properly discharged their duty they had the God-given authority to punish evildoers. While the text certainly puts the lie to pagan myths, it nonetheless grounds the authority of the Roman administration in the sovereign, determinative will of God: “There is no authority except by God, and the ones that are have been established by God” (Rom 13:1).<sup>86</sup>

Second, it hardly seems likely that the text has no relevance for future generations of Christians based solely on Jewett’s view that this section was occasioned by circumstances regarding Paul’s mission to Spain. Nearly all of Paul’s letters are occasional to some extent. If Jewett’s approach were followed consistently, we would hardly be able to derive normative implications from any of Paul’s writings. A better way to approach Paul’s letters (and the rest of the NT, for that matter) would be to achieve an understanding of how Paul’s original meaning has implications for other contexts. To write off the apostle’s remarks as irrelevant to a Christian conception of the state will not do. It is an easy way to set aside an important text, but it is not hermeneutically sound. Moreover, Paul’s words make it clear that he intends for his words to have wider implications. Note what the two clauses affirm: “There is no authority except by God, and the ones that are have been established by God.” The first clause expresses a general truth which was well established in Second Temple Judaism: governments, including civil authorities, rise and fall according to the determinative will of God.<sup>87</sup> The second clause is an application of the general principle to the current case: the Roman authorities (“the ones that are”) have their position as a result of God’s sovereign ordination. To say that this text only applies to the first century Roman authorities simply does not do justice to the generalization that Paul makes in the first clause.

<sup>85</sup> This is also the approach taken in Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul* 394 and 409: “This is not an abstract theology of civil authority that can be generalized to all Christian situations. . . . We already saw Paul’s command to obey earthly government in Chapter 7’s comments on Romans 13:1–7 and recognized that it was not a general universal decree, but a specific Roman situation.”

<sup>86</sup> Incidentally, the principle Paul states here sounds remarkably similar to that found on the lips of Jesus in John 19:11, “You would have no authority [ἐξουσίαν] over me unless it had been given to you from above.”

<sup>87</sup> Wright, “Letter to the Romans” 721: “It belongs with mainstream Second Temple Jewish tradition, and has parallels, including one surprising one, in the NT (e.g., Wis 6:3–10; John 19:11).”

b. *N. T. Wright*. Wright approaches Romans 13 somewhat differently than Jewett, though he still arrives at conclusions that are consistent with the FP.<sup>88</sup> To begin with, he rejects the idea that the passage only applies narrowly to the situation in the Roman church to which Paul was writing.<sup>89</sup> Wright argues that Paul teaches at least to some extent “that even when they are grievously deceived and almost demonic, ruling authorities still have a certain level of divine authorization.” Thus Romans 13 connects rather fluidly with the end of chapter 12, which enjoins Christians not to take their own vengeance but to leave room for the wrath of God. Thus the existence of God-ordained authorities expresses God’s desire “that even in the present time . . . there should be a measure of justice.” The implication for the believers in Rome is that they can be assured that “justice is served not by private vengeance but by individuals trusting the authorities to keep wickedness in check.”<sup>90</sup>

But Wright argues nonetheless that the passage contains an implicit rebuke of the Roman Empire (and thus of American imperial pretensions). That rebuke comes in at least two ways. First, what Paul says in this text must be read against the backdrop of the “extravagant claims” of the growing imperial cult, which virtually divinizes the emperor and thus forms the ideological basis for imperial domination. When viewed in this light, Romans 13 merely continues the counter-imperial message of the rest of the book of Romans, which argues (at least implicitly or in code) that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not.<sup>91</sup> Thus, “Romans 13 constitutes a severe demotion of arrogant and self-divinizing rulers. It is an undermining of totalitarianism, not a reinforcement of it.”<sup>92</sup> Second, Wright argues that Romans 13 cannot be legitimately used to construct a theory of “just war.” For Wright, since Romans 13 “does not mention or allude to the interactions between different civic communities or nations,” this passage has little relevance to Christian reflection on the possibility of a “just war.”<sup>93</sup> Wright’s reflections are worth quoting at length:

I write this in the wake of September 11, 2001. . . . In the debates that followed that terrible day Romans 13 was frequently invoked in support of military action by the United States and its allies against other countries; and one of the great problems of Christian moral discourse has been precisely that Romans 13 does not deal with such matters. That is why “Just War” theory

<sup>88</sup> I will be interacting primarily with Wright’s commentary on Romans. But a short summary of his exegesis on Romans 13 can also be found in Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* 78–79.

<sup>89</sup> Wright, “Letter to the Romans” 717: “What Paul actually wrote still looks very much like a general statement about ruling authorities, not a pragmatic assessment of Rome, or the present situation.”

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* 718.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*: “Did not Paul believe, and hint at several points in Romans itself, that the gospel and rule of Jesus the Messiah, the world’s true Lord, subverted the gospel and rule of Caesar, whose cult was growing fast in precisely the cities (Corinth, Ephesus, and so on) where he spent most of his time?”

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* 719.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* 720.

was invented, in an attempt to develop the idea of magistracy, of a justice that kept society in balance, beyond the borders of a particular jurisdiction and into the realms of conflict between nations. The problem with this is, to put it perhaps oversimply, that Romans 13 is dovetailed into an argument against the taking of private vengeance (12:14–21). When punitive and retaliatory action is taken against a nation, or a group within a nation, it becomes difficult to maintain that it is judicial and legitimated by Romans 13. That is not to say that such action is wrong or unjustified, only that this text will not support it. Many have concluded, rightly in my view, that the only way forward is the establishment of a worldwide justice system that will carry moral weight across different cultures and societies. Unfortunately, one of the obstacles to this is precisely the determination of some of the more powerful nations to oppose such a thing, lest they themselves be brought to account for the ways in which they have used, and perhaps abused, their own power. Romans 13 will not help in addressing these issues, then. But the rest of Romans, setting forth God's justice, freedom, and peace over against those of Caesar, could certainly do so.<sup>94</sup>

Even though Wright gets there via a different exegetical route, he still arrives at the same destination as Jewett as far as the FP is concerned. Romans 13 cannot be used to justify the claims that some have made for the legitimacy of governments to exercise force outside their own borders. Since this appeal to Romans 13 is one of the major props of both ancient and modern empires, an important support of western imperial ideology is thereby removed. On this exegesis, Romans 13 fits nicely with the overall counter-imperial message of Romans, which not only confronts the imperial exploits of Rome, but also the military interventions of modern-day America.<sup>95</sup>

At least two problems undermine Wright's FP reading of Romans 13. First, Wright's claim that this text cannot be applied to the question of "just war"

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 723.

<sup>95</sup> Wright's application of the "Fresh Perspective" to America's so-called "War on Terror" is not without its problems. To bring up just one example, N. T. Wright delivered a controversial lecture in November 2006 about America and its war on terror, titled, "Where is God in 'The War on Terror'?" (A public lecture in Durham Cathedral, November 9, 2006, available on-line at [http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_War\\_On\\_Terror.htm](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_War_On_Terror.htm)). He argues, among other things, that the American war in Iraq is but an immoral extension of America's imperial ambition to dominate the world. His description of America's war in Iraq reads: "The angry superpower, like a rogue elephant teased by a little dog, has gone on the rampage stamping on everything that moves in the hope of killing the dog by killing everything in reach." Not only does Wright condemn the Iraq war in particular, but he also criticizes the "war on terror" in general as a "counter-productive" assault on Islam, which in his words "has been an enormous force for civilization in the world." Wright says that "the only way to fight terror is by working for mutual understanding and respect." For Wright, the American empire's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan amount to fighting "one kind of terror with another." Gilbert Meilaender published a scathing review of Wright's lecture in the February 2007 issue of *First Things* in an article titled "Wrong from Wright." Meilaender writes (p. 11), "There's too much wrong in the analysis and prescription offered by Bishop Wright. This lecture is the sort of thing that tempts folks to say that bishops should stick to theology and avoid politics, but, in fact, what's wrong here is both political and theological. A little less confidence and a lot more nuance would be needed before some of us could be attracted by such episcopal advice. . . . I myself cannot find in that analysis the mature political judgment for which Bishop Wright calls. It fails to pay close attention to who is actually doing much of the killing now taking place. It fails to pay attention to who is actually observing rules of war and who is not (an unsurprising failure in one who thinks that making war on terrorists is simply fighting 'one kind of terror with another,' an astonishingly imprecise analysis)."

is not very convincing. No one disagrees that Paul's instruction applies to local civil magistrates in Rome. But we can hardly separate such magistrates from the imperial regime that empowered them to collect the very taxes to which Paul refers. Moreover, if Paul's background really is shaped by Second Temple Judaism (as Wright insists over and against the likes of Richard Horsely), then we are hard pressed to limit "there is no authority except by God" to civil magistrates. The OT texts to which Wright refers as background describe God's sovereignty over the imperial exploits of the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and perhaps even the Romans.<sup>96</sup> If Paul's thinking in Romans 13 is rooted in such texts, how can we limit the principle expounded in Romans 13 to local magistrates? Such a limitation does not seem justified in light of OT texts that describe God's sovereignty over the rise and fall of empires—texts that Wright insists are the background for Paul's reflections in Romans 13. Thus I am not convinced that Wright has made a compelling case for rejecting Romans 13 as a basis for Christian ethical reflection upon "just war." Second, Wright's analysis appears overly interested in confronting the "imperial" ambitions of America—so much so that one cannot help but wonder if the exegesis is being driven by the politics. No one disagrees that Romans 13 demolishes the claims of arrogant, self-divinizing imperial power. But it does so by way of implication, and, as argued above, it does so in such a way as to confront *all* powers which set themselves against God's purposes. The narrow application to America and her allies makes the interpretation sound as if it is being driven by an agenda rather than by the details of the text.<sup>97</sup> This approach seems to be a rather tenuous basis upon which to dismiss the long tradition of Christian "just war" interpretations of this text, a tradition that goes back at least as far as Augustine.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Wright, "Letter to the Romans" 718. Wright cites Daniel's interpretation of the King's dream, which likely refers to the rise and fall of the Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires (Dan 2:37–49). Some of the other texts that Wright lists refer explicitly to Assyria (Isa 10:5–11), Babylon (Isa 46:11; Jer 29:4–9; Dan 1:2; 2:21; 4:25, 32; 5:18), and Persia (Isa 44:28–45:5).

<sup>97</sup> E.g. N. T. Wright, "God, 9/11, the Tsunami, and the New Problem of Evil," *Response* 28 (2005), accessed on-line, <http://www.spu.edu/depts/uc/response/summer2k5/features/evil.asp>: "The reaction in America and Britain to the events of September 11 has been a knee-jerk, unthinking, immature lashing out. Don't misunderstand me. The terrorist actions of al-Qaeda were and are unmitigatedly evil. But the astonishing naivety which decreed that America as a whole was a pure, innocent victim, so that the world could be neatly divided up into evil people (particularly Arabs) and good people (particularly Americans and Israelis), and that the latter had a responsibility now to punish the former, and that this justified the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, is a large-scale example of what I'm talking about—just as it is immature and naive to suggest the mirror image of this view, namely that the Western world is guilty in all respects and that all protestors and terrorists are therefore completely justified in what they do." This material appears in a slightly different form in N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006) 27–28.

<sup>98</sup> For a recent survey of the Christian "just war" tradition, see J. Daryl Charles, "Just-War Moral Reflection, the Christian, and Civil Society" *JETS* 48 (2005) 590: "The church's fathers—ancient, medieval, and modern—formulated out of the crucible of contemporary life what they understood to be a Christian response to the problem. Thus, we are not without resources—enduring resources—to help us think about these matters. . . . Christian reflection on the ethics of war is rooted squarely within the mainstream of Christian moral tradition and not a recent—or uniquely modern—development." It is my view that N. T. Wright is far too dismissive of this robust tradition within the history of interpretation.

## IV. CONCLUSION

An evaluation of the claims of the FP takes on a new priority as we consider what appears to be an increasingly polarized evangelical movement in North America. It seems as if the left-right divide of the American political spectrum has been superimposed on evangelicalism, as traditional theological conservatives remain by and large politically conservative and the emerging church and the evangelical left align with traditionally liberal causes. We note the frequent references to America as an empire within the writings of leaders such as Brian McLaren<sup>99</sup> and Jim Wallis.<sup>100</sup> McLaren, regarded widely as a leader in the emerging movement, names N. T. Wright as a theological thinker who shapes his own beliefs and practices and who has “enriched my reading of the Bible in profound ways.”<sup>101</sup> The extent to which McLaren and Wallis are indebted to the FP interpreters is unclear. But it is widely known that N. T. Wright is a favored author among those participating in the Emergent conversation.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Brian McLaren, “Christianity and the ‘Pride of Power,’” *Belief.net* (October 9, 2006): “I just returned from a five-week, seven-country speaking tour of Latin America. . . . In each country, I heard Christian leaders . . . express amazement and dismay at the relative silence of the church in the USA. . . . They know we are against terrorism, but they don’t know if we are against American empire and domination. I tried to tell our fellow Christians in Latin America that many of us are speaking out against these things, but I had to admit that doing so feels like an exercise in going against the current, not only in the culture at large, but in the Christian community as well. The degree to which Christianity in the USA has capitulated to a neo-Constantinian compromise with empire is disturbing to our Christian brothers and sisters around the world . . . and it should be to all of us in the church in the USA.” Brian McLaren, “An Open Letter to Chuck Colson,” accessed online: <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/000018.html>: “The U.S. action in Iraq may convince many people around the world that we’re just another powerful elite bent on domination, coercion, and elimination of our opponents through a messianic metanarrative of American Empire. So 9/11 may not mark a return to the good old days of modernity after all, at least not outside our borders, and not for long.”

<sup>100</sup> Jim Wallis, “Dangerous Religion: George W. Bush’s theology of empire,” *Sojourners* (September–October 2003), accessed online: <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0309&article=030910>: “The use of the word ‘empire’ in relation to American power in the world was once controversial, often restricted to left-wing critiques of U.S. hegemony. But now, on op-ed pages and in the nation’s political discourse, the ‘concepts of empire, and even the phrase ‘Pax Americana,’ are increasingly referred to in unapologetic ways. . . . The real theological problem in America today is no longer the Religious Right but the nationalist religion of the Bush administration—one that confuses the identity of the nation with the church, and God’s purposes with the mission of American empire. America’s foreign policy is more than pre-emptive, it is theologically presumptuous; not only unilateral, but dangerously messianic; not just arrogant, but bordering on the idolatrous and blasphemous. George Bush’s personal faith has prompted a profound self-confidence in his ‘mission’ to fight the ‘axis of evil,’ his ‘call’ to be commander-in-chief in the war against terrorism, and his definition of America’s ‘responsibility’ to ‘defend the . . . hopes of all mankind.’ This is a dangerous mix of bad foreign policy and bad theology.”

<sup>101</sup> R. Alan Streett, “Interview with Brian McLaren,” *CTR* 3 (2006) 6–7.

<sup>102</sup> NT scholar Jim Hamilton has noted the popularity of N. T. Wright among emerging leaders and has speculated as to why Wright appeals to this sector of evangelicalism. Hamilton writes: “Besides the fact that Wright is a great writer . . . , Emergent pastors often critique traditional forms of evangelicalism, embrace narratives and stories, eschew propositions, and relish fresh approaches to old questions. N. T. Wright is not afraid to go after those both to the right and the left of himself,

In any case, as many evangelicals move toward the left side of the American political spectrum, the FP on Paul is hardly on the radar screen for much of evangelicalism. Even Andreas Köstenberger, in his outstanding recent faculty address on current trends in NT scholarship, does not mention the FP.<sup>103</sup> Yet even as many evangelicals are currently overlooking the FP, I would argue that the approach represented by the majority of SBL's "Paul and Politics" group does not offer a way forward for evangelical interpreters. Yes, one detects a strain of anti-American bias among FP interpreters inasmuch as America is presumed to be an empire. But this is not the reason that this approach falters. The FP founders on questionable uses of parallels, on a hermeneutic predisposed toward *eisegetical* readings of Paul, on a refusal to accept the authenticity of all 13 of Paul's epistles, on a bias that fails to see the critical lack of analogy between modern day America and imperial Rome, and on an inability to incorporate Rom 13:1–7 into its paradigm.

Evangelicals who read Paul on his own terms are not required to take sides on whether Superman fights for truth, justice, *and* the American way, but neither are they likely to hear coded imperial messages in Paul's gospel. But they would all do well to take all of their biases and agendas captive and to make them obedient to Messiah Jesus. That would involve critiquing not only the American way, but every power that sets itself up as a rival to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

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he is a gifted storyteller, and he always communicates with creativity and verve. On the one hand, Wright's book *The Resurrection of the Son of God* is an 800 page academic tome that defends the bodily resurrection and commands the attention of every New Testament scholar, liberal or conservative. And this fat book reads like a novel. On the other hand, Wright takes cheap shots at Martin Luther and has lately taken to critiquing US foreign policy as imperialistic and reminiscent of the Roman Imperial Cult denounced by the Apostle Paul. Wright's failure to speak openly and clearly on the issue of homosexuality, however, robs his pronouncements of their prophetic potential and leaves him looking a little left of the Bible. This mix of respect for historic orthodoxy and ancient tradition, serious doubts about the way that Protestants have formulated the doctrine of justification, with open contempt for the political right resonates with many in the emergent stream. So a book like *The Challenge of Jesus*, which takes a fresh look at Jesus in light of his Jewish background, catches a wave of discontent and holds out a new opportunity to 'speak truth to power.' This commentary was taken from the weblog of James Hamilton, "Why Are Emergent Pastors Reading N. T. Wright?" (August 7, 2006) on-line: <http://jimhamilton.wordpress.com>.

<sup>103</sup> Andreas Köstenberger, "Of Professors and Madmen: Currents in Contemporary New Testament Scholarship," *Faith & Mission* 23 (2006) 3–18.