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THE “FRESH PERSPECTIVE” ON PAUL: A THEOLOGY OF ANTI-AMERICANISM

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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, un-redacted 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.”¹ 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. There have been

¹Erik 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>).

many who have argued that the American war in Iraq and President George W. Bush's so-called "cowboy diplomacy"² 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 unilateralism that falls somewhere outside truth, justice and all that is good."³

The truth of the matter is that left-leaning activists, politicians, and academic elites of both America and Europe have been castigating the so-called "American Way" for quite some time—at least in as much as the "American Way" is perceived by them as a shorthand for a totalizing and oppressive American Empire. In Europe, for example, one of the dominant post-Cold War foreign policy positions is one that conceives of a united Europe emerging as a counter-balance to American military and economic dominance in the world. This position has been held by those who think it dangerous for the United States to stand without rival now that the other superpower, the Soviet Union, has passed from the geopolitical scene.⁴ For them, the

²Mike 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]). Unfortunately, they incorrectly define "the Bush Doctrine" as the unvarying application of unilateralism and pre-emptive military action. President Bush has never said that unilateralism and pre-emption are the only tools he was willing to use in addressing global threats. Indeed, he has said quite the opposite. President Bush made a calculation concerning Iraq based on a decade failed diplomacy and a failure of weapons inspectors to verify the destruction of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Given those circumstances, the President decided on pre-emptive action without authorization from the U.N. President Bush has said that such measures are not always appropriate for every emerging threat in the world. As a matter of fact, Allen and Ratnesar quote White House counselor Dan Bartlett to this effect, "The President has always stressed that different circumstances warrant different responses. The impression that the doctrine of pre-emption was the only guiding foreign policy light is not true. Iraq was a unique circumstance in history, and the sense of urgency on certain decisions in the early part of the first term was reflective of a nation that had to take decisive action after being attacked. would always choose such a course" (Dan Bartlett, quoted in "The End of Cowboy Diplomacy"). The "Bush Doctrine" is less doctrinaire than the President's political opponents want to concede, but this important fact is lost on Allen and Ratnesar.

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

⁴Tony Blair is a notable exception to this widely held view in Europe. As Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, he has advocated a strong Atlantic alliance between the U.S. and the U.K. His stalwart support of this old alliance appears to be a minority position in the U.K. Melanie Phillips writes, "Fury at Prime Minister Blair for being President Bush's 'poodle' has reached such a pitch that the most successful Labor prime minister in memory is being forced out of office because of his support for U.S. policy in Iraq and Israel. . . The disturbing fact is that Britain is consumed by a rampant anti-Americanism and an allied hostility toward Israel, which are driving public debate into irrationality, prejudice and appeasement. . . As a result, the prospects for the alliance between Britain and

bi-polar realities of the Cold War provided a needed counter-balance to the American juggernaut. Indeed, the conventional wisdom among such critics is that America is not just promoting its interests in the world, but is projecting its *empire* onto the world, and this empire must be checked.

Thus, it has become common fare even among academic elites *within* the United States to label America as an “empire.” Even historical scholars are wont to demonstrate this alleged *pax Americana* by drawing analogies between empires of the past and America in the present. In June of 2006, for instance, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill hosted the annual meeting of The Historical Society, the topic of which was “Globalization, Empire, and Imperialism in Historical Perspective.” A theme that appeared in the essays presented at the conference was the comparison of the United States to the various imperial regimes of world history.⁵ The most provocative papers at the conference were provocative precisely because they challenged the prevailing opinion among historians that views America as an empire.⁶ Perhaps the only thing more provocative than arguing that America is not an empire is economist Deepak Lal’s essay that held out the possibility that empires can be a stabilizing force for good in the world.⁷

Lest one suppose the dreaded “E” word to be the sole property of activists and academics, we should note that the President of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, put the matter on the

the United States in the post-Blair era do not look promising” (“Britain is turning on the U.S. — at its own peril,” in *USA Today* [October 24, 2006], 13A).

⁵E.g., Daniel Skinner, “From Athens to Baghdad: The Rhetoric of Necessity in Thucydide’s Speeches of Pericles and the Contemporary United States,” paper presented at the bi-annual meeting The Historical Society, Chapel Hill, NC (June 1, 2006).

⁶See for example Michael G. Carew’s contribution, “Globalization, Empire, and Imperialism in Historical Perspective: The Dilemma of American Economic Imperialism 1929-1945,” paper presented at the bi-annual meeting The Historical Society, Chapel Hill, NC (June 1-4, 2006). Carew argued against the notion that America presides over an economic empire through the instrumentality of multi-national corporations.

⁷Deepak Lal, “Empires and Order,” Paper for the Plenary Session, The Historical Society meetings, University of North Carolina (June 3, 2006), 4: “I would argue that America is an indirect empire which seeks to control both domestic and foreign policy of large parts of the world. . . [Most empires] have provided international order, and most importantly they have provided their Pax over a large geographical space, ending the disorder that previously prevailed.” See also Deepak Lal, *In Praise of Empires: Globalization and Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); *In Defense of Empires*, The Henry Wendt Lectures (Washington, D.C.: The AEI Press, 2004).

front-burner of the popular media last September in his address to the United Nations. Pointing to a copy of Noam Chomsky's book *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*,⁸ Chavez jeered United States President George W. Bush saying,

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.⁹

To be sure, Chavez was serving his own political interests in this speech. Following his address, you would have been hard-pressed to find any person (besides perhaps Danny Glover and Cornell West¹⁰) who would touch Chavez's incendiary remarks with a ten foot pole.¹¹ Nevertheless, Chavez's rant against "American imperialism" reflects a mainstream view among those on the left side of the American political spectrum. The rhetoric of "empire" is a fixture among those who have an antipathy towards American hegemony in the world affairs, and Chavez brought this rhetoric out into the popular consciousness. Chavez's public antics were but

⁸Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003).

⁹Hugo Chávez, "President Hugo Chávez Delivers Remarks at the U.N. General Assembly," CQ Transcripts Wire (September 20, 2006), accessed on-line: www.washingtonpost.com.

¹⁰Glover (actor) and West (scholar) were among those who applauded Chávez's incendiary speech at Mt. Olivet Baptist Church in Harlem. Chávez called President George W. Bush "an alcoholic and a sick man" (Hugo Chávez, quoted in Ian James, "Chávez to Discount Oil for U.S. Poor," Associated Press [September 22, 2006], accessed on-line: www.washingtonpost.com).

Noam Chomsky's reaction to the Chávez speech was more positive than negative. Though he would not have chosen the "oratory" of Chávez, Chomsky had this to say about Chávez after the speech: "I have been quite interested in his policies. Personally, I think many of them are quite constructive." Chomsky also noted that Chávez "has gone through six closely supervised elections" and has the support of his people (Noam Chomsky, quoted in "A Scholar Is Alive, Actually, and Hungry for Debate," *New York Times* [September 22, 2006], accessed on-line: www.nytimes.com).

¹¹"Republicans and Democrats Criticize Chavez," Associated Press (September 22, 2006), accessed on-line: www.nytimes.com.

a glimpse of the kinds of things that American academics like Noam Chomsky have been saying for a very long time.

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 elites. It is also the hallmark of a fledgling movement in the academic guild of New Testament 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 New Testament in light of a Greco-Roman context that was dominated by Roman imperial ideology. While this new movement has been gaining some steam in historical Jesus and Gospel studies,¹² the movement has really taken off in Pauline scholarship.

In what N. T. Wright has dubbed a “Fresh Perspective” (FP) on Paul,¹³ this new strand of scholarship holds as axiomatic at least two assumptions, with a third assumption being increasingly advocated in the literature.¹⁴ First, it is assumed that the Roman imperial cult was pervasive in Paul’s missionary context. Second, Paul’s gospel is, therefore, both theopolitical and counterimperial¹⁵ in that it offers an explicit 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.”¹⁶ In this new movement, the analogy¹⁷ between

¹²E.g., Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

¹³The 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?” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 83 (1, 2001): 21-39. Wright’s recent short work on Paul also uses the term: *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

¹⁴I have taken this three-part outline of the fresh perspective from Michael J. Gorman, “The gospel alternative,” *Christian Century* 122 (2005): 36.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*

America and Rome is so direct, that Pauline repudiations of the “powers”¹⁸ 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 political liberals have been lodging against the United States’ economic and foreign policies.

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 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.¹⁹

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*.²⁰ 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

¹⁷Richard 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 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).

¹⁸E.g., Colossians 2:10, 15.

¹⁹Hal Taussig, “Prologue: A Door Thrown Open,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59 (2005): 1.

²⁰*Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, volume 59, numbers 3-4 (2005).

dominance of right-wing Christian fundamentalist orientations. . . the call to resist complicity with empire in all areas is embedded in the most sacred and ancient of Christian scriptures.²¹

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.²² 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*,²³ which is a collection of essays that brings together some of the most 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[sic? President Bush?].

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

²¹“Editorial Statement” *USQR* 59 (2005): vii.

²²Richard 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.

²³Richard 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 two other significant collections of essays. The first is *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), and the second is the relatively recent *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, ed. Richard Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004).

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 . . .²⁴

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 counterimperial message.

For this reason, Hal Taussig praises "the emergence of this new field of study" and to lament that Christians have missed the counterimperial 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 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.²⁵

Really? I wonder if this is the only way to "account" for all the unenlightened reading of the

²⁴Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 3-5.

²⁵Hal 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."

Bible that's been going on for 1,200 years. Perhaps 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. My own view is that this statement reflects 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" and to favor the latest fad in modern biblical criticism.

Nevertheless, the question that I want to consider in the next section of this essay is this. Does this FP on Paul really provide Evangelicals an adequate basis for understanding the Pauline witness in his 13 New Testament letters? Also, are the analogies between America and Rome really all that helpful in bringing the biblical witness to bear upon contemporary world politics? What I hope to show is that the counter-imperial, post-colonial interpretations of Paul are not so much motivated by a "fresh" and more accurate understanding of Paul as they are being motivated 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 to the contemporary political scene. Regardless of how one evaluates the historical claims of the fresh perspective, reading a counterimperial (and thus anti-American) bias into Paul's gospel is not a helpful way for evangelicals to approach Paul's letters.

Evaluating the Fresh Perspective

Questions about the Hermeneutics of the FP

We start our evaluation by highlighting the hermeneutical problems associated with FP, problems which overlap somewhat with FP's historical observations about Paul's missionary context. To my mind, 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 counterimperial readings of Paul.

Major papers from the first four years of the "Paul and Politics" group were published

in 2000 in a festschrift for Krister Stendahl, titled *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*, edited by Richard Horsley.²⁶ In the introduction, Horsley describes what the impetus was for forming the “Paul and Politics” group. He says that a growing number of New Testament 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.”²⁷ 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.”²⁸ So 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.²⁹

But these *post-colonial* readers of Paul have not been going at it alone. Horsely writes that “Pioneers 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.”³⁰ So 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

²⁶Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000).

²⁷Richard Horsley, “Introduction: Krister Stendahl’s Challenge to Pauline Studies” in *Paul and Politics*, 5-6.

²⁸Richard Horsley, “Introduction” in *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, 23.

²⁹Richard Horsley, “Introduction: Krister Stendahl’s Challenge to Pauline Studies” in *Paul and Politics*, 10.

³⁰Richard Horsley, “Introduction: Krister Stendahl’s Challenge to Pauline Studies” in *Paul and Politics*, 11.

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.³¹

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 right 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."³²

Thus Horsley advocates an approach to interpretation that effectively diminishes the role of the author of the text (in this case, the Apostle Paul). 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.³³ 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

11. ³¹Richard Horsley, "Introduction: Krister Stendahl's Challenge to Pauline Studies" in *Paul and Politics*,

14. ³²Richard Horsley, "Introduction: Krister Stendahl's Challenge to Pauline Studies" in *Paul and Politics*,

³³"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).

and liberation in mind.³⁴

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 Luther³⁵ to the adherents of Hirsch or Vanhoozer³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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, as we shall see, the political and cultural biases of FP interpreters often become *eisegetically* read into the Pauline texts that they are studying. This sad result is

³⁴Richard Horsley, "Introduction: Krister Stendahl's Challenge to Pauline Studies" in *Paul and Politics*, 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, Supplements to Novum Testamentum (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, revised edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; London: SPCK, 1993), 172-97; Richard A. Horsley, "Liberating Narrative and Liberating Understanding: The Christmas Story" in *The Bible and Liberation*, 154-71.

³⁵N. 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.

³⁶E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967): 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 sign 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.

³⁷E.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.

inevitable, given their stated hermeneutical assumptions. Even N. T. Wright (who is himself an advocate of counterimperial readings of Paul) 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.”³⁸ 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.

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 that seeks to uncover the author’s intended meaning.³⁹ Yet even so, one wonders if Wright’s politics are not the real reason that he hears “coded” anti-imperial messages in some of Paul’s key terms. For instance, in his essay “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” Wright argues that Paul gives a “Coded Challenge to Empire” in Philippians 3:20-21, so that when the text says “20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; 21 who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.” Wright argues that Paul’s descriptors of Jesus in these verses are “Caesar-titles” and are used in

³⁸N. T. Wright, “A Fresh Perspective on Paul” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 83 (1, 2001): 28.

³⁹This 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, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49 (2006): 622-25.

this text to subvert “the Caesar-cult and the entire panoply of pagan empire.”⁴⁰ For Wright, Paul used these terms intentionally so that the Philippians would understand that his gospel meant that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not.

What Wright does in Philippians 3:20-21 (and elsewhere) is a common feature of FP exegesis. The approach goes something like this. Identify parallels between Paul’s gospel terminology and the terminology used of Caesar, the empire, or the imperial cult. Any links in terms or themes are thereby considered to be prima facie evidence that Paul consciously wrote to undermine Caesar and his empire by applying imperial terms to the reign of Jesus.

The examples of this hermeneutical procedure are too numerous to reproduce here, but I will illustrate the point with one example. We note J. R. Harrison’s 2002 article in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, “Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki.”⁴¹ 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.⁴² Thus, for Paul to call Jesus κύριος⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ But is it not more likely that Paul’s use of κύριος in reference to Christ derives from Judaism and the LXX scriptures where the name “Yahweh” is frequently rendered as κύριος?⁴⁵ Is not Paul’s use of κύριος

⁴⁰N. T. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire” in *Paul and Politics*, 173, 175.

⁴¹J. R. Harrison, “Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki,” *JSNT* 25 (2002): 71-96.

⁴²J. R. Harrison, “Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki,” 78.

⁴³1Thes 1:1, 3, 6; 1:8 ; 2:15, 19; 3:8, 11, 12, 13, 4:1, 2, 6, 15, 16, 17; 5:2, 9, 12, 23, 27, 28.

⁴⁴Harrison 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).

⁴⁵BDAG, s.v. κύριος, 2.b.

primarily motivated by his desire to link the Messiah Jesus with the κύριος of the Old Testament? I think the answer to these questions is yes, and it therefore makes it less likely that Paul was trolling around Greco-Roman cults in order to find linguistic grist for his Christology.

This underlying hermeneutical approach is the basis for many of the problems with FP exegesis. This approach is problematic for at least two reasons: (1) it fails to recognize that the primary source-book of Paul's gospel vocabulary is the LXX, not the pagan Caesar-cult, and (2) it confuses Paul's intended *meaning* by a conflation of Paul's *meaning* and the *implications* that flow from that meaning (to use E. D. Hirsch's terminology).

Nevertheless, proponents of the FP justify reading Paul in light of such parallels because classical scholars have demonstrated the pervasiveness of the Caesar-cult in Paul's missionary context. Thus they conclude 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 that it subjugated. Indeed, as N. T. Wright has said, 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."⁴⁶

Within the imperial cult the emperor was worshipped as the *son of god* who brings *peace* to the empire, the announcement of which is called *good news* or *gospel* (εὐαγγέλιον, εὐαγγελίζομαι).⁴⁷ The cult even depicted the emperor as a *savior*. Thus when Paul uses such

⁴⁶E.g., N. T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire" in *Paul and Politics*, 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.

⁴⁷N. T. Wright's work on the Pauline term for the gospel—εὐαγγέλιον—is another example of the questionable hermeneutic mentioned above, "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

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 "coded" in it.

But again, we return to the difficulties in reading Paul in this way. First, Paul's explicit and implicit allusions to the Septuagint stand as *prima facie* evidence that Paul's theological lexicon was shaped more by Judaism than by any Greco-Roman influence. 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 Old Testament as well—that is, implicit but clear allusions to the Old Testament scriptures.⁴⁸ Does it really make sense to read the vocabulary of Paul's gospel as a mimicking of paganism's vocabulary? Is it not more likely that Paul's theological lexicon finds its origin in the Judaism in which he was so deeply embedded?

These questions lead us to the conclusion that the FP is at odds with all the helpful things that we have learned from the "New Perspective"—namely, that Paul is best understood within the framework of 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

108 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 223-39. Wright however does not fall into the either/or dichotomy of Horsley and others. Wright emphasizes the importance of both of Paul's Jewish context and his imperial context: "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'" (p. 228).

⁴⁸See Richard Hays' criteria for ascertaining Pauline "echoes" of Old Testament scripture (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989]).

a reexamination of what it is that Paul is against primarily. . . does he stand primarily over against “Judaism”?⁴⁹

Horsley’s answer to this question is clear because he follows with a litany of familiar Pauline texts in which he argues that Paul is not primarily challenging Judaism, but the Roman powers that be—texts like 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:2-3; 1 Corinthians 2:6-8; 15:24; Philippians 1:15-30; 2:14-18; 3:20-21; Galatians 1:4.

But here again, we ask the question. Is it really true that Paul narrowly targets Roman imperial power in these contexts? In all of these texts, isn’t Paul’s target more broad than just Rome? Could it be Fresh Perspective proponents are confusing *implication* with *meaning* (to use the Hirshian terms). The problem with identifying Rome narrowly as Paul’s target is that it takes the teeth out of the implications for every other kind of non-imperial power in the world that opposes Christ, and it makes Rome (and thus America) the singular/chief propagators of evil in the world. But this is manifestly not the case. 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., Colossians 2:10, 14). By implication, this means that the gospel has a prophetic rebuke both for the geo-politically insignificant oppressors of Darfur, the one-child enforcers of China, or the *laissez faire* secularists of America. To single out Rome as Paul’s target helps the Fresh Perspective folks 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 Chavez’s Venezuela, who by some strange inconsistency do not receive much ire at all from proponents of the Fresh Perspective.

Questions about a Narrow Application to the Roman Empire

Proponents of the fresh perspective view the rapid growth of the emperor cult in Greece and Asia minor in the first century as the hermeneutical backdrop for our interpretation

⁴⁹Richard A. Horsley, “General Introduction,” in *Paul and Empire*, 5-6.

of Paul's letters.⁵⁰ 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 mission⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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 be this or that variety of emperor worship or paganism. Paul (in concert with Second Temple Judaism⁵³) 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 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. Maybe there was no "code" at all, and just maybe Paul used more generic terminology because he wanted to oppose all the powers, not just Rome (e.g., Colossians 2:10, 15).

⁵⁰Richard A. 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."

⁵¹N. 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 (N. T. Wright, "A Fresh Perspective on Paul?" *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 83 [1, 2001]: 23).

⁵²N. T. Wright, "A Fresh Perspective on Paul?" 23.

⁵³N. 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" (N. T. Wright, "A Fresh Perspective on Paul?" 29).

Questions about the nature of scripture

Much of the counter-imperial readings of Paul will 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.”⁵⁴ 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 leadership in the undisputed letters of Paul and the same references in the authentic letters.⁵⁵

N. T. Wright’s participation in this conversation is a needed counterbalance 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. . . there 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.⁵⁶

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

⁵⁴Neil Elliot, “Paul and the Politics of Empire,” 26.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 19.

seems to represent a minority position among counterimperial readers of Paul.⁵⁷

Question about the Analogy between America and Rome

Proponents of the Fresh Perspective 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 we question whether the empires of Rome and America are really so analogous. This is true especially when we observe the contemporary debate among historical scholars over the definition of what an empire is. [\(fill in examples here, perhaps from Deepak Lal\)](#) 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. 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."⁵⁸ 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.

That is why one suspects that term "empire" seems to be dumbed down 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

⁵⁷A recent counterimperial reading of Colossians that accepts Pauline authorship is Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

⁵⁸Tacitus, *Agricola* 30 (Loeb, p. 81) **PA 6156 .T3 1970 v. 1**

population.”⁵⁹ Yet this definition appears to be intentionally crafted to suggest an analogy between Rome and America. But the analogies don’t really ring true upon careful reflection. First of all, the definition is so generic that it could apply to the very nations that Walsh and Keesmaat claim the United States’ is oppressing (like Iraq). Second, there is a profound difference between the way 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. The United States does not conquer territories as Rome did. Perhaps those quick to draw analogies between the U.S. and imperial Rome would do well to remember Colin Powell’s words to the World Economic Forum in 2003:

We have gone forth from our shores repeatedly over the last hundred years and we’ve done this as recently as the last year in Afghanistan and put wonderful young men and women at risk, many of whom have lost their lives, and we have asked for nothing except enough ground to bury them in, and otherwise we have returned home to seek our own

Questions about Romans 13:1-7

[Deliberately postponed for two reasons: (1) space, and (2) in order to take into account Robert Jewett’s new commentary on Romans which is being released this month and is being highlighted in next week’s meeting of SBL’s “Paul and Politics” group.] What follows is a summary of N. T. Wright’s commentary on Romans 13:1-7:

First, the passage belongs very closely with the end of chapter 12. Private vengeance is forbidden, but properly authorized officials have the duty to keep order and punish wrongdoers. This is a standard Jewish viewpoint, not far from a moderate Pharasaic line.

Second, Paul insists, over against normal imperial rhetoric, that earthly rulers are not themselves divine, but are answerable to the one true God. They are God’s servants, and as servants they can expect to be held accountable. This passage actually represents a sever demotion of the rulers from the position they would have claimed to occupy.

Third, precisely because of all the counter-imperial hints Paul has given not only in this letter and elsewhere but indeed by his entire gospel, it is vital that he steer Christians away from the assumption that loyalty to Jesus would mean the kind of civil disobedience and revolution that merely reshuffles the political cards into a different order. . . The main thing Paul wants to emphasize is that, even though Christians are the servants of the Messiah, the true lord, this does not give them carte blanche to ignore temporary subordinates whose appointed task, whether (like Cyrus) they know it or not, is to bring at

⁵⁹Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*, 31.

least a measure of God's order and justice to the world. The church must live as a sign of the kingdom yet to come, but since that kingdom is characterized by justice, peace and joy in the Spirit (14.17), it cannot be inaugurated in the present by violence and hatred.⁶⁰

I am not convinced that Wright has worked out the implications of Romans 13 as extensively as is needed in order to support the condemnations of the sword that he has pronounced elsewhere. For instance, elsewhere Wright has not only condemned the United States' current war in Iraq, he has also castigated America's unsheathing of its sword in Afghanistan.

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.⁶¹

I am not convinced that this is a faithful application of Romans 13, nor does it take into account the just war tradition in Christian political thought since the time of Augustine.

Conclusion

An evaluation of the claims of the fresh perspective takes on a new priority as we consider what appears to be an increasingly polarized evangelical movement in North America. Not only are divisions in our own Society apparent (given the recent debates over inerrancy and open theism), but evangelicalism is in many ways struggling for its identity in its contemporary context. It appears 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.

⁶⁰N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 78-79.

⁶¹N. T. Wright, "God, 9/11, the Tsunami, and the New Problem of Evil," *Response* 28 (2005): accessed online, <http://www.spu.edu/depts/uc/response/summer2k5/features/evil.asp>.

It is perhaps those in the emergent wing of evangelicalism who have the most in common with this understanding of the way the Bible addresses America's current role in world affairs. We note the frequent references to America as an empire within the writings of emergent leaders and their friends on the evangelical left. Note Brian McLaren's comments in his essay "Christianity and the 'Pride of Power'":

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.

Furthermore, here is McLaren in "An Open Letter to Chuck Colson":

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.⁶²

Also, here is the editor of *Sojourners* magazine, Jim Wallis, in an essay titled, "Dangerous Religion: George W. Bush's theology of empire":

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

⁶²Brian McLaren, "An Open Letter to Chuck Colson," accessed online: <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/000018.html>.

theology.⁶³

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.⁶⁴

In any case as many evangelicals are drifting toward the left side of the American political spectrum, the Fresh Perspective on Paul is hardly on the radar screen for much of evangelicalism. Even in Andreas Köstenberger's outstanding, recent faculty address on current trends in New Testament scholarship, he does not mention the Fresh Perspective.⁶⁵ Yet even though many evangelicals are currently overlooking the FP, I would argue that the approach represented by the majority of the "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 in as much as America is presumed to be an empire. But this is not the reason that this approach falters. The FP founders 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

⁶³Jim Wallis, "Dangerous Religion: George W. Bush's theology of empire" *Sojourners* (September-October 2003), accessed online: <http://www.sojournal.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0309&article=030910>.

⁶⁴New Testament 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, 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>.

⁶⁵Andreas Köstenberger, "Of Professors and Madmen: Currents in Contemporary New Testament Scholarship." *Faith & Mission* (forthcoming).

incorporate Romans 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 also every power that sets itself up as a rival to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.