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The Lion Against the Eagle: A Critical Appraisal of the Anti-Imperial Reading of Paul[1]

Abstract: The article presents a synthetic analysis of empire criticism in Pauline letters, beginning with the omnipresence and character of imperial cult in Paul's time. Subsequently, the author highlights the places in Pauline letters that are usually associated with anti-imperial rhetoric. The following part of the article critically appraises the arguments for the presence of an anti-imperial script in Paul's letters. The conclusions critically assess the methodology and premises of empire criticism, which essentially ignores Paul's argumentative context, refers to the problematic "hidden transcript," and can be strongly informed by contemporary ideologies. According to the author, Paul does not fight with the Empire, accepting its institutions and social order and trying to change them from within. Although the apostle does not consciously use the anti-imperial script, the Good News he preached and the communities he founded possess an anti-imperial potential. In light of this, the article ultimately advocates a careful application of empire criticism to Paul, which can serve a better understanding of the New Testament background and the message of Paul.

Keywords: Pauline letters, empire criticism, imperial cult, anti-imperial rhetoric, "hidden transcript"

The imperial context of Paul's teaching is still a relatively young research area, which in N.T. Wright's view has not been particularly noticeable in the interpretation of the apostle's writing.[2] It is

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[2] Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 79. This article refers to contemporary research on the imperial context and the so-called empire criticism. The connection between Paul and the cult of Caesars is nothing new, as can be seen in Deissmann,

linked with a broader category of "Paul and politics" and categorized as belonging within biblical studies that refer to social sciences and postcolonialism.[3] Some term this strand simply "empire criticism," in analogy to literary or rhetorical criticism.[4] Richard A. Horsley undoubtedly contributed to the trend's popularity, with three volumes he edited on this approach.[5] There have been numerous other publications recently that attempted to synthetically present the precepts of empire criticism, assessing it both positively and critically.[6] The value of this approach lies clearly in its positioning of Paul's texts in their proper historical and cultural context, in which the cult of the emperors played a significant role. Could Paul have overlooked the fact that the titles of Son of God and Savior – which he used to refer to Christ – were likewise deployed to refer to the Caesars? Was his message of Christ as the Lord at the same time a challenge to the Roman rule? What could have been the reaction to Paul's teachings of early Christian communities spread across the Empire? These are just a few of the many questions that arise in the context of empire criticism of Pauline letters. Other queries will pertain

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Light from the Ancient East, 346–347, 352–353, 368, 370. On Deissmann and his legacy, see Klostergaard Petersen, "Imperial Politics in Paul," 102–113.

[3] Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, mentions this research trend in Chapters 11 and 12, discussing Paul in the context of social and political studies. On the connection between empire criticism and postcolonial approach in Paul, see Rieger, *Christ & Empire*; Segovia – Sugirtharajah, *A Postcolonial Commentary*, 194–337; Diehl, "Anti-Imperial Rhetoric," 58–61.

[4] McKnight – Modica, "Introduction," 17–18.

[5] Horsley, *Paul and Empire*; Horsley, *Paul and Politics*; Horsley, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*.

[6] Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 59–79; Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 3–64; Burk, "Is Paul's Gospel Counterimperial?," 309–337; White, "Anti-Imperial Subtexts," 305–333; Carter, "Paul and the Roman Empire," 7–26; Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities*, 2–14; Fantin, *The Lord of the Entire World*, Chap. 1; Harrill, "Paul and Empire," 281–311; Diehl, "Empire and Epistles," 217–263; McKnight – Modica, *Jesus Is Lord*, 39–82, 147–196; Bird, *An Anomalous Jew*, 205–255; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1271–1319; Klostergaard Petersen, "Imperial Politics in Paul," 101–127; Punt, "Paul the Jew," 1–17.

to the methodology deployed to identify anti-imperial rhetoric in Paul and its ideological roots.[7]

This article offers a critical presentation of empire criticism that analyzes Paul's texts in the context of the apostle's polemic with the Empire. First, a general overview of imperial cult will be presented to corroborate the value of empire criticism in the reading of Paul's letters. Subsequently, those excerpts of Paul's epistles will be pointed out and critically analyzed in which anti-imperial rhetoric is often indicated. Finally, the conclusions will assess the deployment of empire criticism in the reading of Paul, pinpointing both its weaknesses and merits. In light of the numerous publications on this issue released in recent years, it is impossible to analyze all of them here, for which reason this article will necessarily be of a synthetic character.

1. The Character and Ubiquity of Imperial Cult in Paul's Time

That an anti-imperial stance should be taken into consideration in Paul is corroborated first and foremost by the apostle's historical context, in which imperial cult played a very important role.[8] Even though Augustus and his successors willingly evoked republican traditions in their titles and institutions, the system that they created was essentially a single-ruler one. The emperor held genuine power, being simultaneously the highest priest (*pontifex maximus*), a censor

[7] On this, see Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 61–62; Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities*, 19–44; Diehl, "Anti-Imperial Rhetoric," 58–76.

[8] On the imperial cult and research on this phenomenon, see primarily Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor*; Price, *Rituals and Power*; Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 3–131; Gradel, *Emperor Worship*. See also Naylor, "The Roman Imperial Cult," 208–215; Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities*, 14–19; Cohick, "Philippians and Empire," 167–170. The majority of scholars argue that imperial cult finds its confirmation in written texts, monuments, numismatics, and inscriptions. Some authors question its scope in Thessalonica and Philippi of Paul's times or suggest that Caesar was only one of the many deities worshiped in Ephesus or Corinth, see e.g., Diehl, "Anti-Imperial Rhetoric," 54–55 with reference to Miller, "The Imperial Cult," 321–322.

of morality (even if not especially moral himself), a paragon of civil virtues, and, at least in some aspects, equal to gods.[9] This should come as no surprise, as it was through the emperor – as it was through gods – that all the goods the ancients could have aspired to were given.[10] Caesar was responsible for the *cursus honorum*, he distributed titles and property, and he appointed officials. The emperor managed material goods, the access to which was reserved for approximately 1–5 percent of the population, the elite close to and being a client of the *domus caesaris* that was its client.[11] The patron-client system with Caesar on its top was the backbone and cement of an ethnically and religiously diversified Empire.[12] It was closely related as well to imperial cult.[13] The temples devoted to Caesars and the monuments erected in their praise in the cities of the whole Empire, as well as the titles of *neokoroi* (guardians of Caesars' temples) were coveted by the largest and most important metropolises as these were related to privileges, political prestige, and material goods.[14] As R. Gordon describes it, local elites were lobbying for the titles of priests of imperial cult, as this meant inclusion in the network of material goods transfer and social connections, with Caesar at its forefront. This solidified the order of the Empire, in which the privileged

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[9] Horsley, "The Gospel of Imperial Salvation," 15–17.

[10] See Pliny the Younger, *Paneg.* 26–32, 34, 38, 51, 69, 71, 90; Veyne, *Bread and Circuses*, 292–419; Harland, "Honours and Worship," 319–334; Garnsey – Saller, "Patronal Power Relations," 97–99; Chow, "Patronage in Roman Corinth," 105–110; Patterson, "The Emperor and the Cities of Italy," 89–104; Kowalski, "The Brokerage of the Spirit," 640–641.

[11] On the size of the elites controlling the transfer of goods, see MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 88–91; Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 53; Batten, "Brokerage," 169.

[12] See Pliny the Younger, *Paneg.* 25.5; Saller, *Personal Patronage*, 3; Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, 175–205. On the characteristics of the patron-client relation, see Kowalski, "God the Benefactor," 48–51.

[13] Nystrom, "We Have No King," 32–33.

[14] For the list of *neokoroi*, their literary, epigraphic, and numismatic evidence, as well as the character of the emperors' worship performed there, see Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*; Burrell, *Neokoroi*. See also Price, *Rituals and Power*, 249–274. For a more succinct form of the author's main argument, see Price, "Rituals and Power," 47–71.

minority was in the possession of property and titles and, emulating Caesar, construed themselves as benefactors for the majority that was deprived of access to these goods.[15]

The cult of Caesars, which can be termed a state religion, had nothing to do with mysticism, but a lot to do with pragmatism and socio-economic benefits, cementing the ideologically diversified Empire. As contemporary studies of the issue unanimously maintain, it would be a mistake to disregard this cult as religiously tepid or to assess it on the basis of a Christian understanding of religion, conceived of in terms of a close relation between an individual and a deity. In antiquity, religion functioned primarily on the social level, being strictly connected with politics and economy.[16] It is argued that the cult of the emperor stemmed from the combination of worship of the Hellenistic rulers and the genius, an attendant spirit of *paterfamilias*.[17] The Romans did not pray to Caesars but for Caesars' health and prosperity, as corroborated, for example, by Ovid's prayer and incense burned by him during his exile to Pontus in front of the images of Augustus, Livia, and members of the emperor's family.[18] In a similar vein, pro-consul Saturninus explained to Christians: "We too are a religious people, and our religion is a simple one: we swear by the genius of our lord the emperor and we offer prayers for his health – as you also ought to do."[19] Price argues that offerings were essentially made not to Caesars but to deities to plead for the emperors' health and success.[20] The emperors did not proclaim themselves as gods when they were still alive, but were rather deified after death.[21] Even Caligula, Domitian, and Commodus

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[15] Gordon, "The Veil of Power," 126–137. See also Heen, "Phil 2:6–11," 128–136.

[16] See Price, *Rituals and Power*, 10; Horsley, "The Gospel of Imperial Salvation," 10–13.

[17] Price, *Rituals and Power*, 23–52.

[18] Ovid, *Ex Ponto* 4.9.105–134 (LCL).

[19] Et nos religiosi sumus et simplex est religio nostra, et iuramus per genium domni nostri imperatoris et pro salute eius supplicamus. See *The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, 3 after Musurillo, *The Acts*, 86–87.

[20] Price, *Rituals and Power*, 210–233.

[21] On the deification of the emperors and the related symbolism and ceremonies, see Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 261–369. Such was a state of affairs in Roman Italy

– who were particularly inclined to use divine titles – did not function as gods in the state cult during their lives.[22]

The figure and rule of Augustus gave an essential stimulus for the development of imperial cult.[23] Initially reluctant and reticent, the *princeps* was trying to show his subjects that he was an ordinary mortal, reserving divine worship for gods. However, circa 36 BCE Italian cities considered him worthy of worship and placed his statues in temples, while his birthday started to be publicly celebrated around 30 BCE. When Augustus himself allowed the cities of Asia and Bithynia, Nicomedia, and Pergamon to erect a temple for him (30/29 BCE) on the condition that it will be simultaneously dedicated to the goddess Roma, he opened the door for the worship of himself, his wife Livia, members of the imperial family, and his successors. In 27 BCE his genius was linked to the name of Jupiter and *Di Penates*.[24] Even though, as Nystrom suggests, worship of living emperors and their relatives did not amount to their deification, it differed substantially from the worship of the Hellenistic rulers, for whom statues had been built and whose deeds had been praised. The inscriptions dedicated to Augustus and other Caesars presented their deeds as equal to those of gods, making them benefactors of the whole world.[25] On the statues erected for them they were presented as gods, clad in imperial robes, half naked or fully naked, with reference to Greek myths and tales of heroes, while the women from imperial families resembled Aphrodite, Hera, or Hestia.[26]

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and in the provinces emulating Rome, though not necessarily in municipal cults of Asia Minor, where in Friesen's view living Caesars were likewise termed *theos*. See Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 56–76.

[22] Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 140–161.

[23] Price, *Rituals and Power*, 54–62. On the cult of Augustus, see also Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 109–139, 140–197 on its legacy and development.

[24] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age*, 302; Nystrom, "We Have No King," 33–34.

[25] On the fast-growing imperial cult, see Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age*, 297–298. A shorter version of the author's argument may be found in Zanker, "The Power of Images," *Paul and Empire*, 72–86.

[26] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age*, 298–302.

As argued above, the cult of the emperor engaged particularly city elites and important citizens who could sponsor temples or festivals worshipping Caesars, and thereby could earn the titles of imperial priests.[27] The title could be awarded for a given period, for lifetime, or could even be inherited. In one family in Ephesus the title of the priest of Caesar's cult was passed for five generations, while a citizen of Megalopolis on Peloponnese, who made a name for himself by erecting the temple dedicated to Caesar and by restoring grandeur to other sacral buildings, was given the hereditary title of the high priest of imperial cult for life.[28] Imperial cult was essentially reserved for old Roman elites with good social standing and for representatives of local aristocracy. The data from Pompeii suggest that the cult of emperors was supported by nobility, whose donations and deeds doubly surpassed the initiatives of the new financial aristocracy or the liberated slaves. For the latter, however, imperial cult was also an important tool to climb the social ladder and gain recognition that they could not have on account of their status as unable to hold important public offices.[29] The history of the Euryclid clan provides a good example. A Corinthian inscription from times close to Paul survived to this day, dedicated to a Julius Spartiaticus, a descendant of the famous Julius Eurycles, whose father was in all likelihood a pirate.[30] He helped Augustus win the battle of Actium and was rewarded with Caesar's friendship and control over Sparta. To prove his loyalty, he introduced the cult of Augustus there, with his descendants being future guardians of the cult. One of them was Julius Spartiaticus, Eurycles's grandson, the *flamen* of the divine Julius, the *pontifex* and the highest priest of the House of Augustus.[31]

In his study of Caesar's cult, S.R.F. Price investigates Asia Minor and draws attention to the ubiquity of the cult's elements forming part of the inhabitants' everyday life through statues, temples, and celebrations termed Nedameia or Sebasta, in which whole

[27] On this, see also Nystrom, "We Have No King," 34–35.

[28] Price, *Rituals and Power*, 62–64.

[29] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age*, 316–323.

[30] See the translation of the inscription in Chow, "Patronage in Roman Corinth," 104. The Latin text with the commentary in West, *Latin Inscriptions*, 50–53.

[31] Chow, "Patronage in Roman Corinth," 108–109.

communities took part.[32] Municipal cities and cults, having, according to Friesen, more freedom than those organized on the provincial level, were a particularly effective platform for the popularization of the cult of *sebastoi*. The praise of Caesars there was not the realm of the elites only, but it involved wider social strata. In municipal cults the emperors were worshipped together with local gods (e.g., Demeter and her mystery rites), with their statues placed in the agora, in the building of the city council, in the gymnasium or in the bathhouses.[33] Friesen discusses Aphrodisia in detail, where *sebastoi* are presented as a new branch of Olympic gods related to Aphrodite, and hence close to the local community.[34]

In light of the tangible benefits, the cities of the Empire competed with one another to organize festivals and host temples dedicated to Caesars, and boasted of the titles and divine epithets granted them.[35] The festivals were organized every four or two years, or even every year on Caesar's birthday, important anniversaries related to his rule, or the day of his visit in the city or province. The celebrations could last for as long as a week, as in Gythium, where subsequent days served to honor members of the imperial family. Frequently such celebrations were accompanied by gladiators' fights. The whole cities were lavishly decorated and welcomed visitors from elsewhere.[36] Looked forward to and requiring communal effort, these events constituted an important element cementing the local community.[37]

The emperor's cult encompassed the singing of hymns dedicated to them and their families, processions, offerings, and feasts in honor of them. It resembled mystery cults, which made use of the rulers' statues, lit up with lamps for a more dramatic effect.[38] The emperors were also worshipped in individual households: figures of Hadrian

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[32] Price, *Rituals and Power*, 101–132.

[33] On the imperial municipal cults, see Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 56–76.

[34] Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 77–95.

[35] Price, *Rituals and Power*, 62–64; Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age*, 302–307.

[36] See a description of a similar bustle in Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 35.15–16 (LCL). See also Price, *Rituals and Power*, 101–107.

[37] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age*, 299.

[38] Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 104–116.

were discovered in Miletus, of Livia in Villa dei Misteri in Pompeii, Galba's bust in Herculaneum, bronze figurines of emperors from the Julio-Claudian dynasty in Rome, a small bust of Commodus in Ostia, and full-size statues of Caesars in six villas in Italy.[39] Household worship was related to living rulers and encompassed also carousals, described by Ovid in the following way: "And now, when dank night invites to slumber calm, fill high the wine-cup for the prayer and say, 'Hail to you! hail to thee, Father of thy Country, Caesar the Good!' and let good speech attend the pouring of the wine."[40]

Imperial temples occupied the most prestigious places in the cities, towering over them and transforming their symbolic space.[41] They were also, understandably, especially richly decorated.[42] Notably, the citizens of Miletus – which already had an imperial temple – decided to place an altar dedicated to the emperor in the middle of the courtyard of the city council building as a constant reminder of Caesar's divine worship. In Ephesus alongside two smaller imperial temples, an imperial portico was constructed in front of the city council buildings and was dedicated to Artemis, Augustus, and Tiberius, with two natural-size statues of Augustus and Livia. There was one more temple in the city dedicated to Augustus and another one to Domitian.[43] The example of Pompeii clearly illustrates the position of imperial cult vis-à-vis other cults. Regular-size buildings and statues from the republican period were overshadowed by the colossal size of imperial buildings and statues.[44] In this way Caesars emphasized their divine rule and the care they took of their subjects.

Furthermore, imperial cult was closely connected with the emperor's diplomatic efforts and rule. Out of eleven cities of Asia that sent their delegates to Rome in 23 AD to lobby for concession to erect

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[39] Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 116–121; Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 198–212.

[40] Ovid, *Fast*. 635–638: *Iamque ubi suadebit placidos nox umida somnos, larga precaturi sumite vina manu, | et "bene vos, bene te, optime Caesar!" dicite suffuso sint bona verba mero.*

[41] Price, *Rituals and Power*, 122–169.

[42] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age*, 298.

[43] Price, "Rituals and Power," 61–64.

[44] Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age*, 326–327.

an imperial temple, Tiberius ultimately chose Smyrna to reward it for its loyalty to Rome.[45] Imperial cult forged a web of contingencies and relations that supported Roman administration. Ambassadors sent to Rome were frequently recruited from the priests at imperial temples, which enhanced the chances of their successful mission. The emperor himself might have justified his decisions with referring to his affinity with gods: this endowed his decrees with the status of divine grace, thereby enhancing their power. This way, the Greeks saw Caesar's decision to delegate some authority to the descendants of past kings as partaking of power together with great gods and of graces that infinitely surpass human goods.[46] Finding such support in religious institutions, which was especially visible in Asia Minor and clearly served political and economic goals, Rome did not have to reinforce its power in a military or administrative way. The respect that had to be shown to the emperors stemmed from their role as guarantors of peace, thereby evoking the mythical motif of gods freeing the world from chaos. In his famous *Res gestae*, Augustus introduces himself as a ruler that suppressed all domestic wars, granting the world the most valuable gift of peace (34:1–3).[47] For the civilized Greeks, the cult of the emperors constituted recognition and justification of their absolute power, spreading not only in the East but also in the Empire's western provinces.[48]

Ever since Price's important study, the co-existence of political and religious elements in imperial cult has been accentuated without deprecating either of them.[49] Friesen places emphasis on the cult's character of a genuine religion that establishes a myth of sorts about the creation of the world, in which the emperors are linked to the Olympian gods, just as in Aphrodisia. Imperial cult produced a new vision of the world with its center in Rome and a new time marked by the birth of *sebastoi*. It enhanced the existing patriarchal system and gender roles, serving politics and social order. Finally,

[45] Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 37–38.

[46] *IGR* IV 145 = *Syll.*[3] 798, translation in Price, *Rituals and Power*, 244. Greek text in Lafaye, *Inscriptiones graecae*, 54–56.

[47] Horsley, "The Gospel of Imperial Salvation," 13–15.

[48] Horsley, "The Gospel of Imperial Salvation," 22–24.

[49] Price, *Rituals and Power*, 14–16, 234–248.

it was linked to eschatology through the apotheosis of Caesars, confirming a utopian vision of the end of time realized during their reign.[50] In turn, Gradel explains the emperors' worship by the categories of status and patron-client relations. Divine titles given to living emperors constituted the highest earthly honor and manifested their elevation over other mortals. The author terms it "relative divinity," which constitutes the greatest possible distinction and power surpassing that of other people, but is not tantamount to divine nature.[51] The cults of Roman Italy studied by Gradel essentially focus on living rulers.[52] Through exchange characteristic of the patron-client relation, the emperors who enjoyed divine worship during their lives were supposed to corroborate and pay it back through their rule, and for that they were rewarded with the status of state deities after their death. If they broke the deal, they could be deprived of the divine title and sentenced to oblivion.[53] The synthetic overview presented in this section shows the specificity and diversification of imperial cult which combined social, economic, political, and religious elements. Early Christians likewise found themselves in the sphere of influence of the omnipresent imperial religion.

2. Paul and a Challenge to Caesar

Early Christians experienced an obvious dilemma when confronted with the worship of the emperors. On account of their Jewish background, they deplored worshipping human beings instead of God. Primarily, however, Caesar occupied the place belonging to Christ, the belief in whose divine status, in the view of Larry Hurtado, formed the core of Christian faith from the very beginning.[54] As Price argues, state religion only rarely gave offerings to living rulers, positioning them instead on the border between the divine

[50] Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 122–131.
[51] Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 25–26, 29, 72.
[52] Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 88, 97.
[53] Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 369–370.
[54] Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*.

and human worlds and giving offerings for their sake.[55] It also did not demand allegiance to the deity, which is one of the basic criteria for Arthur Nock's differentiation between ethnic (pagan) religions and religions of prophetic type, including Christianity.[56] This does not mean, however, that imperial cult did not demand faith understood as loyalty and faithfulness to Caesars. Their cult was essentially an apotheosis of the empire, and questioning it not only positioned Christians in opposition to the Roman rule but also excluded them from social, economic, and political life, construing them as destroyers of public order.[57] Thus, early Christians found themselves in a situation of conflict with imperial ideology, as corroborated by the texts of the New Testament.

2.1. Paul's Anti-Imperial Rhetoric in Letter to the Romans

Paul's writings identified most often as evincing anti-imperial rhetoric include 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Corinthians, Romans, and Philippians, as well as Colossians or even Galatians. The primacy in this respect is given to Letter to the Romans, which will be discussed here first. In the *praescriptum*, the apostle introduces himself as Christ's servant entrusted with preaching the Gospel promised beforehand through the prophets: the Gospel concerning the Son who was descended from David according to the flesh and declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead (Rom 1:1–4). In comparison with other Pauline epistles, this introduction seems unique inasmuch as it gives a lot of attention to the Gospel that Paul preaches and to Christ. The word *euangelion*, which the apostle uses to describe the Gospel he is announcing, is unanimously argued to function within Greco-Roman culture to denote good news, such as the emperors' victories, decrees, and orders, information about their birth or ascension to the throne.

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[55] Price, *Rituals and Power*, 215–233.

[56] Nock, *Conversion*, 1–16. On faith and ritual in Rome, see Linder – Scheid, "Quand croire c'est faire," 47–61; Durand – Scheid, "'Rites' et 'religion'," 23–43.

[57] Price, *Rituals and Power*, 122–126. Christians were accused of not praising gods and of failing to care for the good of the polis.

Flavius Josephus mentions that when news of Vespasian's succession was circulated,[58] each city celebrated the "good news" (*euangelia*) and gave offerings.[59]

According to Dieter Georgi, early Christians derived the term *euangelion* not from LXX, but from the imperial context.[60] The Priene inscription from circa 9 BCE is often cited as the most telling example of the term's imperial use. The inscription itself is a composite recreated on the basis of Latin and Greek texts discovered in Priene, Apamea, Maionia, Eumeneia, and Dorylaion.[61] It refers to the announcement made by the council of the province of Asia in 29 BCE concerning a gold wreath to be given to the individual who comes up with the highest honor to honor the new god Augustus. Roman proconsul Paullus Fabius Maximus (governor of Asia circa 11–9 BCE) received the award twenty years later for suggesting the introduction of solar calendar in Asia and establishing Augustus's birthday as the beginning of the new year. The proconsul himself is mentioned a few times in the text of the inscription advertised in two languages: Latin and Greek.[62] In recognition of his achievements, he was granted divine attributes in Alexandria Troas and was proclaimed to be related to Apollo Smintheus.[63]

The inscription from Priene proclaims the beginning of the new year and the start of the Roman officials' term on 23 September, that is on Augustus's birthday.[64] Three extensive fragments of the inscription have survived, the first of them being the edict of Asia's proconsul, while the second and the third are excerpts of two decrees by the council of the province of Asia. The proconsul's edict also mentions the circumstances of its enforcement, namely the anniversary of divine Augustus's birth that contributed to restoration and

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[58] Price, *Rituals and Power*, 215–233.

[59] Flavius Josephus, *B.J.* 4.618.

[60] Georgi, "God Turned Upside Down," 148–149.

[61] For the Greek text of *OGIS* 458, see Dittenberger, *Orientis graeci inscriptiones*, 49–59; Ehrenberg – Jones, *Documents*, 74–76. On the inscription, see Porter, "Paul Confronts Caesar," 168–171.

[62] Dittenberger, *Orientis graeci inscriptiones*, 55, 56, 57, 59.

[63] Porter, "Paul Confronts Caesar," 171.

[64] Georgi, "God Turned Upside Down," 148–149.

sustenance of the natural order of the world. Further, it describes Augustus's birth and life, which thanks to the providence became a source of good for everyone, and lists the celebrations to commemorate the emperor's birthday.[65] The same content is reiterated in the first decree of the Asian provincial council, which additionally mentions Caesar's benevolence for the local rulers and ends with a list of festivities to celebrate his birthday.[66] One fragment of the decree of the council of the province of Asia, which is well preserved and seems of particular interest here on account of its lexical parallels with Romans, reads as follows:

> Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior [*soter*], both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance [*phanein*] excelled even our anticipations, surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god [*theos*] Augustus was the beginning of the good news [*euangelia*] for the world that came by reason of him which Asia resolved in Smyrna.[67]

The introduction of Romans and the Priene inscription are linked primarily by the vocabulary related to the Gospel and the recognition of the divine status of Christ and Augustus, respectively. However, Stanley Porter goes as far as to claim that these two texts are connected not only by terminology but also by a similar narrative on the figures they describe.[68] The so-called inscription from Priene

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[65] Dittenberger, *Orientis graeci inscriptiones*, 49–52; Porter, "Paul Confronts Caesar," 169.

[66] Dittenberger, *Orientis graeci inscriptiones*, 53–58; Porter, "Paul Confronts Caesar," 169–170.

[67] The fragment's Greek text in Dittenberger, *Orientis graeci inscriptiones*, 53–55; Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor*, 273; Ehrenberg – Jones, *Documents*, 74–75; Evans, "Mark's Incipit," 68–69.

[68] Porter, "Paul Confronts Caesar," 168–184.

was known in at least five locations in Asia, where its fragments were found, and constitutes an example of many other such inscriptions dedicated to Caesar in numerous places of the Empire. To make his readers aware of the popularity of the emperor's cult, Porter cites epigraphic evidence from Halicarnassus and Assos, where Augustus is made equal to Zeus as a savior of humankind, and from many other places where Paul preached the Gospel, including Tarsus. The apostle must have been familiar with the following dedication present there: "The people of Tarsus [worship] Emperor Caesar August, Son of God."[69] What is more, similar inscriptions were discovered, among others, is Ephesus, Pergamon, Athens, Pontus, Milos, Nicopolis, Sardis, Pisidian Antioch, on Crete and Cyprus, where the apostle traveled to preach the Gospel.[70]

In Porter's view, the analysis of form and content of the Priene calendar inscription and its comparison with the beginning of Romans (1:1–4) shows numerous parallels which at the same time underscore the difference between Augustus and Christ. Two Pauls appear side by side in the introductions: the Roman proconsul and Augustus's representative, Paullus Fabius Maximus, and Paul, a servant of Christ. While the proconsul presents himself as an all-powerful figure and reflection of Caesar's power, Paul calls himself Christ's slave, emphasizing his Master's divinity. Further, the inscription accentuates the necessity for the coming of Augustus and the good news about him as stemming from a natural cause, that is the chaos and ruin that the world has fallen into. Paul, by contrast, speaks of Christ's Gospel as a result of the workings of supernatural powers, foretold by the prophets and constituting the fruit of God's promise and loyalty (Rom 1:2). A reference to Augustus's birth goes hand in hand with a reference to Christ's birth as David's descendant according to the flesh. While Caesar earns his divine status through his deeds and is given the title by other human beings, Christ is proclaimed Son of God by God himself and he genuinely is Son of God. Christ's divinity is revealed by the Spirit in resurrection, which points to Christ's nature as equal with God's. The goods brought by Caesar

[69] Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, 167, n. 1.
[70] Porter, "Paul Confronts Caesar," 170–174.

are of material character only, while Christ grants both material and spiritual gifts. Caesar's birthday is to be celebrated as a religious holiday in all Asia, while Paul speaks of obedience to Christ that is required of the whole humanity. All these parallels show how much Christ surpasses Caesar, who is god only by human decree. According to Porter, Letter to the Romans announces in the heart of the Empire that there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ.[71]

Paul's anti-imperial rhetoric continues in Rom 1:16–17. The thesis of Chapters 1–4, or even of the whole Letter to the Romans according to some, abounds in imperial terms and titles. The apostle states:

> For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'. (NRSV)

As Robert Jewett notes, this is a subtly veiled challenge of imperial cult.[72] While the Priene inscription presents Augustus as savior, joy and giver of life for the whole universe, Letter to the Romans attributes all these functions to Christ. It is Christ, not Caesar, who comes to give the abundance of life – not only current but eternal – to the whole world. He comes to all without exception, as emphasized by the merism "to the Jew first and also to the Greek."[73] Christ lays claims to the universal dominion asserted earlier by Rome.[74] In Augustus's times the cult of *salus populi Romani* was restored, with Caesar as its guarantor, savior, and giver of peace not only to Rome but to the whole world.[75] Even though the title of *soter* – savior – was readily placed on Caesars' statues, it was Christ who saved humanity from sin, restoring their dignity of God's children and leading them

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71 Porter, "Paul Confronts Caesar," 175–184.
72 Jewett – Kotansky, *Romans*, 137–141.
73 Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 68.
74 Georgi, "God Turned Upside Down," 150.
75 See Bird, "One Who Will Arise," 157.

to resurrection and eternal inheritance (Rom 3:21–26; 5:20–21; 6:4–11, 17–18; 8:1–4, 9–11, 14–17, 29).[76]

What is more, in Rom 1:16–17 Paul uses a few other terms that strip Caesar of his divinity, transferring it onto Christ. In *Res gestae* (34), describing the deeds of great Augustus, justice is presented as one of the emperor's virtues alongside courage, meekness, and piousness, as determined by the Senate and inscribed on a gold shield placed in Curia Iulia.[77] On an Alexandrian coin, the inscription *dikaiosyne* is used with reference to Nero, depicted in the company of a young woman holding the scales in her hand.[78] However, God's justice (*dikaiosyne*) finds its true reflection in God's Son and not in Roman emperors; it is not a manifestation of Roman law and power but of God's redeeming mercy. It is Christ, not Caesar, that deserves faith (*pistis*), which in the 1st century is also conceived of as an element of imperial ideology. Enumerating Augustus's multiple achievements, *Res gestae* (31–33) speaks of delegates sent to Rome from afar – including India, which never even saw Roman legions – in the hope of seeking the Empire's friendship. During Augustus's reign, many peoples experienced Romans' "good faith" (*fides*) by having amicable relations with Rome (32). The Latin word *fides*, an equivalent of *pistis*, appears here in the sense of loyalty, faithfulness, sincerity, and righteousness exhibited by Rome toward her allies. The cult of the Roman goddess Fides resurfaces in Rome at that time. At the same time *fides* / *pistis* signifies the proper attitude of those who forge allegiances with Rome and show their loyalty, respect, and obedience to the Empire.[79] According to Paul, these should be shown not to Caesars but to Christ.

Dieter Georgi notes in Romans more indications of Paul's polemic with imperial ideology. The author draws attention to the fact that the epistle was created a year before the Senate proclaimed *consecratio* of the assassinated Claudius, which signified his

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[76] On the titles of god and savior that appear on inscriptions dedicated to Caesars, see Chow, "Patronage in Roman Corinth," 105 and n. 5, c–d (105–106).

[77] Georgi, "God Turned Upside Down," 149.

[78] Bird, "One Who Will Arise," 156.

[79] Horsley, "Patronage, Priesthoods, and Power," 93; Georgi, "God Turned Upside Down," 149.

apotheosis, an announcement of his entering the heavens and his deification.[80] This evocatively corresponds to Christ's apotheosis as Son of God revealed by the Father and the Spirit in the event of resurrection (Rom 1:4). In Rom 5:6–8 Paul shows Christ's loyalty (*fides*) surpassing the Roman one as it encompasses also his enemies that he decided to give his life for. The Romans mercilessly punished rebellion and animosity as signs of their enemies' perfidy.[81] Christ also constitutes a new model of humanity surpassing Caesar construed to be the paragon of all virtue. In Phil 2:6–11 and Rom 15:7–9 Paul describes Christ as an example of philanthropy and solidarity with mankind. In turn, in Rom 8:19–25 the apostle questions the ideal of the golden era that supposedly started with Augustus's rule and presents creation that is far from perfection, that moans and sighs in pains of labor, awaiting the fullness of redemption.[82] Finally, Paul combines political ethics with the ethics of love in Romans 13, again surpassing Rome in the laws he establishes. Georgi's analysis shows clearly that in Romans the apostle challenges the official ideology of the Empire, conveying most of the divine Caesars' prerogatives onto Christ. According to the author, this was also acknowledged by Roman authorities that ultimately sentenced Paul to death for treason (*crimen [laesae] maiestatis*). In Georgi's view, this explains Luke's evocative silence in the Acts as regards the end of Paul's life.[83]

Romans is an opulent repository of references for the supporters of empire criticism.[84] In his commentaries and analyses, Robert Jewett treats it as the key to all Pauline letters.[85] N.T. Wright sums up the theme of Romans as presenting the Messiah, son of David (Rom 1:1–4), descendant of Jesse, who will fulfill Isaiah's prophecy, rule over the nations, and become a hope for humanity (Rom 15:12),

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[80] Georgi, "God Turned Upside Down," 151. Letter to the Romans was written during Paul's second stay in Corinth, i.e., circa 55/56 CE. Claudius was murdered in 54 CE, hence his death preceded the creation of the epistle.

[81] Brunt, "Laus Imperii," 29.

[82] Similarly, Jewett, "The Corruption and Redemption," 25–46.

[83] Georgi, "God Turned Upside Down," 152–157.

[84] On the studies of the epistle, see Bird, "One Who Will Arise," 149–152.

[85] Jewett, "Exegetical Support from Romans," 58–71; Jewett, "The Corruption and Redemption," 25–46; Jewett – Kotansky, *Romans*.

thereby constituting competition to Caesar's rule. According to Wright, Paul in Romans, from the first to the last chapter, conveys a clear counter-imperial message. He demands obedience to and faith in Christ as he preaches the Gospel containing the same power thanks to which Christ was raised from the dead, the power bringing genuine justice and salvation. On the meta-narrative level of Romans, Wright discovers God's justice which creates a new family promised to Abraham (1–4), gives peace and freedom, broadening the experience of the exodus (Rom 5–8), and tells Israel's history anew, with its climax in the figure of the Messiah (Rom 9–11). The ecclesiology of Rom 12–16 creates a new community that unites mankind, in Caesar's own backyard. The emperors' efforts pale when compared with God's deed in Christ.[86] Similarly to Georgi and Wright, Niels Elliott reads the basic concepts of Romans (*fides, iustitia, clementia, pietas*) as Paul's conscious polemic with the Empire and as a strategy of construing a model of the society alternative to the Roman one.[87] James R. Harrison in turn sees Paul's epistle as a conscious challenge posed to the Julio-Claudian conception of power, the apotheosis of the House of Caesar, the climax of history related to it, and the system of patronage.[88] Finally, David Wallace and Ian Rock note in Paul's correspondence with the Romans references to motifs familiar from the *Aeneid* and to Messianic eschatology of Augustus and descendants of Aeneas.[89]

Summing up the studies mentioned above, Michael F. Bird contends with their basic hypothesis, claiming that Letter to the Romans evinces tension between different models of sonship, justice, faith, and salvation characteristic of Christianity and the Roman Empire.[90] According to the author, Christ ruling over the nations in Rom 15:5–13, a source of hope for humanity, ultimately challenges Augustus's eternal rule. Paul allegedly articulates here

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[86] Wright, "Paul's Gospel," 167–173; Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 76–78. Similarly, Stegemann, "Coexistence and Transformation," 2–23.

[87] Elliott, "Paul and the Politics of Empire," 17–39; Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations*; Elliott, "The Letter to the Romans," 194–219.

[88] Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities*, 97–323 (Chapters 4–7).

[89] Wallace, *The Gospel of God*; Rock, "Another Reason for Romans," 74–89.

[90] Bird, "One Who Will Arise," 152–158.

a veiled narrative of protest: it is an apocalyptic and Messianic narration whose language makes it covertly anti-imperial.[91] In this view, even the notoriously difficult fragment of Rom 13:1–7 loses its pro-Roman slant. According to Elliott, who shows most creativity in this respect, this is a call to forgo disdain of Jews characteristic of Roman elites,[92] while Wright, Porter, and other scholars note here subjugation of Roman authority to God and his judgment as well as proclamation of the former's temporary character.[93]

2.2. Anti-Imperial Rhetoric in Paul's Other Letters

Caesar and the system he created emerge from confrontation with Christ dethroned and deprived of divinity. According to scholars, Paul indicates this clearly also in his correspondence with the Thessalonians and Corinthians as well as with the Philippians and Colossians. Helmut Koester enumerates three essential lexical parallels between the apostle's thought in 1 Thessalonians and imperial ideology.[94] First, Paul especially frequently employs the term *parousia* to refer to the Lord's coming (1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; see also 2 Thess 2:1, 8). The word was used in antiquity to describe the visit in a city of an important official, king, or emperor.[95] The conclusion is obvious: the community should be prepared for Christ's coming as a ruler (1 Thess 5:4–10), and not for Caesar, whose advent was awaited by the cities and provinces across the Empire.[96] Secondly, in the scenario of the Lord's coming, the believers will

[91] Bird, "One Who Will Arise," 160–161. For the author's comprehensive reading of Romans, see Bird, *An Anomalous Jew*, 227–252.

[92] See Elliott, "Romans 13:1–7," 184–204.

[93] Wright, "Paul's Gospel," 172–173; Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 78–79; Porter, "Paul Confronts Caesar," 183–189; Diehl, "Anti-Imperial Rhetoric," 56–58; Bird, "One Who Will Arise," 158–160. On the history of the text's interpretation, see Burk, "Is Paul's Gospel Counterimperial?," 330–335; Krauter, *Studien zu Röm 13,1–7*; Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities*, 271–323.

[94] Koester, "Imperial Ideology," 158–166. Likewise, Donfried, "The Imperial Cults," 216–217; Harrison, "Paul and the Imperial Gospel," 82–88; Smith, "'Unmasking the Powers'," 57–65.

[95] BDAG, "parousia," 781; LSJ, "parousia," 1343; Radl, "parousia," 44.

[96] Koester, "Imperial Ideology," 158–159.

be taken into the clouds to meet the Messiah (1 Thess 4:15–17). Another term emerges here, namely *apantesis*, used in antiquity to describe a formal welcome of a king or dignitary arriving to visit the city.[97] Finally, Paul mentions that the Day of the Lord will come unexpectedly like a thief for all those who believe in the calamitous *eirene kai asphaleia* or *pax et securitas*, both slogans of Roman propaganda (1 Thess 5:3).[98] Since Augustus's times, the Roman legions were entrusted with the task of ensuring peace and security within the whole civilized world. Ultimately, then, it is Christ, not Caesar, who is the ruler returning to his earthly city/province, one that an individual needs to prepare for and welcome. Christ comes also to terminate the earthly reign of Caesars, who trust in their own power, repeating the words "peace and security" (1 Thess 5:3).

Seconding Koester, Karl Donfried adds that the Thessalonians' anguish stems from persecution and death of their close ones, who die on account of their acceptance of Paul's Gospel dethroning Caesar and undermining the Roman *pax et securitas*.[99] Abraham Smith posits that Paul in 1 Thess 2:14–16 opposes the anti-Jewish Roman elite and the slogans of the Empire mentioned above.[100] Wright agrees that in 1 Thess 4–5 the apostle juxtaposes the coming of Caesar with the second coming of the Lord, whose victorious mission will shatter the illusory order of the Empire. In his view, the mysterious "lawless one" mentioned in 2 Thess 2:3 resembles Caligula, known for attempting to place his own portraits in the Jerusalem temple, becoming an example and prediction of the future godless ruler and opponent of the Messiah.[101] Finally, Harrison consistently perceives 1 Thess 4–5 as Paul's fight with the realized eschatology of Augustus's reign, which he juxtaposes with the fulfillment of times in Christ, the son of David. In 2 Thess 2:1–10 the apostle refers to the untimely

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[97] Koester, "Imperial Ideology," 160. LSJ, "apantesis," 178; Peterson, "apantesis," 380; Lattke, "apantesis," 115 (with reservations towards such an understanding).

[98] Koester, "Imperial Ideology," 162–166. On the expression and its connection with Roman political propaganda, see Weima, "'Peace and Security'," 331–359.

[99] Donfried, "The Imperial Cults," 222–223.

[100] Smith, "'Unmasking the Powers'," 47–66.

[101] Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 74–75; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1289–1292.

celebration of the climax of history (*saeculum*), Saturn's Golden Age, and the restoration of the Empire by the rulers of the Julio-Claudian dynasty; Paul foretells a radically different culmination of history and salvation brought by Christ through his victory over death.[102]

To move to the correspondence with the Corinthians, Richard A. Horsley argues that in 1 Corinthians Paul announces victory over rulers of this world, an expression that hints at the Roman Empire (1 Cor 2:6–8 and 15:24–28). What is more, the apostle rejects key Roman social institutions, asking the believers to steer clear of pagan immorality (1 Cor 5), courts (1 Cor 6), and temples (1 Cor 8:1–11:1). He also renounces the system of patronage by organizing a collection (1 Cor 16; 2 Cor 8–9) which builds a web of solidarity different from the Empire's tributary economy.[103] Corinth is to become a community alternative to imperial communities based on the system of violence, questioning this way the latter's social basis. Through his political rhetoric, based on apocalypticism and vision of Christ's ultimate victory, Paul opposes not only external norms of the Greco-Roman world but also norms interiorized by the Corinthians themselves.[104]

Neil Elliott confirms a strongly anti-imperial message of the First Letter to the Corinthians.[105] The motif of Christ's cross, which appears particularly frequently in the first four chapters of the letter, is read by Elliott as a political message. The apostle shows the Lord as crucified, bearing in mind the fact that it is one of the gravest punishments administered by the Empire to penalize traitors and enforce submission in the population. Christ transforms the Roman tool of punishment, disgrace, and dominance into an instrument of his victory, proving to be stronger than Caesars and manifesting the weakness of their ideology. The Messiah's death acquires a clear political dimension, turning into a protest against military and

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[102] Harrison, "Paul and the Imperial Gospel," 71–96; Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities*, 47–95.

[103] Horsley, "I Corinthians," 242–252. Similarly, Wan, "Collection for the Saints," 191–215; Friesen, "Paul and Economics," 27–54

[104] Horsley, "Rhetoric and Empire," 72–102; Horsley, "The First and Second Letters to the Corinthians," 220–245. Similarly, Ramsaran, "Resisting Imperial Domination," 89–101.

[105] Elliott, "The Anti-Imperial Message," 167–183.

economic aggressiveness of the Empire's state apparatus. Paul's call is interpreted by Elliott in terms of a challenge against the ideology of the Empire that showcases the apostle as Israel's liberator.[106] Paul reflects the anti-imperial pedagogy of the cross, as argued in Elliott's reading of 2 Corinthians.[107] Finally, Wright refers only scantily to the correspondence with the Corinthians but claims that in 1 Cor 15 Paul describes Christ's resurrection as an inauguration of his universal rule over the world, which puts into question Roman power.[108]

Empire criticism is also readily applied to Philippians, where Paul employs terms related to socio-political life of his times, such as *politeuma*.[109] Wright begins his analysis with this term, which may be found in Phil 3:20–21, and with the text itself as an obvious argument for the presence of anti-imperial rhetoric in Paul. The author reads those verses in the context of Phil 2:6–11, which constitutes a hymn praising Christ, who surpasses Caesar in his service, benefactions, dedication, and ultimately in his being elevated by the Father. From the perspective of the narrative in Phil 2:6–11, Christ's exaltation resembles the legitimization of Roman rulers and the way in which they attain their divine titles. The excerpt mentions an attribute of Caesars – "the name above every name" – and refers to Isa 45:23, mentioning God subjugation of Babylonia. This clearly anti-imperial fragment constitutes the basis for Wright's reading of Phil 3:20–21. Paul maintains here that "our citizenship is in heaven" and for this reason Christians living in the Roman colony of Philippi should prepare to welcome Christ rather than Caesar, emulating Paul in this manner (Phil 3:17). How is it to be done? The apostle explains that in the message hidden in Phil 3:1–19. Just as he himself abandoned the pride in his status as a believing Jew, they should let go of their boasting of Roman citizenship. In Phil 3:20–21 Paul wishes the community to emulate him not only in his pursuit of heaven

[106] Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 167–180.

[107] Elliott, "Paul's Self-Presentation," 67–88.

[108] Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 75.

[109] On the authors, texts, and arguments for Paul's anti-imperial rhetoric in Philippians, see Cohick, "Philippians and Empire," 171–178.

but also in his distance from the socio-political ethos and glory of the Empire.[110]

Erik M. Heen likewise takes note of strong opposition to imperial cult in Phil 2:6–11. In contradistinction to Caesar, Jesus does not make unfounded claims to his divinity but is truly entitled to it; his elevation occurs not through domination but through service. It is Christ, and not Augustus, who is the true ruler of the world. In the above-mentioned fragment, the author identifies critique of imperial cult, of the patronage system related to it, and of local elites.[111] In turn, in Efrain Agosto's view, in Philippians and other places of his correspondence Paul fights a practice that was particularly popular in the Empire, namely writing commendation letters. In his epistles, the apostle genuinely appreciates and promotes his collaborators and the Gospel, thereby undermining the Roman system of patronage (1 Thess 5:12–13; 1 Cor 16:15–18; Phil 2:25–30; 4:2–3; Rom 16:1–2).[112]

Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat notice Paul's fight with imperial ideology in yet another letter written during his imprisonment, that to the Colossians. In their view, the apostle makes use of the Old Testament theology and Roman imperial symbols to construe an anti-imperial message based on Christ's sacrifice that brings life whilst Rome emanates death. The hymn in Col 1:15–20 dethrones Caesar to make room for Christ, while in Col 2:15 the Messiah terminates every rule, including that of Caesars.[113] Finally, for Jennifer Wright Knust even denunciation of the vices of the pagan world helps the apostle to criticize Roman imperial propaganda, in which emperors function as alleged paragons and promoters of virtue among their subjects. They clearly fail in this mission.[114] As can be seen, almost every fragment of Paul's correspondence may serve as overt or covert critique of Caesar's rule and of salvation brought by him.

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[110] Wright, "Paul's Gospel," 173–181; Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 71–74; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1292–1297.

[111] Heen, "Phil 2:6–11," 136–153.

[112] Agosto, "Patronage and Commendation," 103–123

[113] Walsh – Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*.

[114] Wright Knust, "Politics of Virtue and Vice," 155–173.

3. Critical Assessment of the Anti-Imperial Reading of Paul

Empire criticism may introduce a certain novelty to the interpretation of Pauline letters, but it also raises justified questions. It is difficult, for example, to agree with Georgi or Wright, who treat the whole Letter to the Romans as an anti-imperial manifesto. It seems dubious that this should be the aim of a letter in which Paul introduces the Roman community to the Gospel that he is preaching (Rom 1:1–15), garnering their support for the missionary journey to Spain that he is planning (Rom 15:23–24).[115] Paul's Gospel, viewed as antinomic, has generated a lot of doubts and criticism, which the apostle sets out to clarify to the community located in Rome. This goal would not be achieved through a text that dethrones Caesar and questions his rule, be it overtly or covertly. On the contrary, it might expose the Roman church to danger and remind the authorities of them, especially if we consider that not long ago, during Claudius's reign, Jews had been banished from the city due to some disturbances caused by Christ.[116] According to Christopher Bryan, the anti-Roman rhetoric also overlooks the Jewish foundation for the title of Son of God, used by Paul, as well as differences between Roman and Christian conceptions of divinity and cult, as a result of which Rome may not have been worried at all by worship of Christ.[117] In turn, Seyoon Kim claims that the critique of the Empire is completely absent from Paul's argumentation in Romans, which concentrates on the power of sin and death and on salvation transcending the political horizon and radically different from the Roman notion of deliverance. In result, it would be difficult for Caesar to compete with Christ. Kim criticizes both Wright and Koester, claiming ironically that the message of Romans

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[115] On the goal of Paul's correspondence with the Romans, see Donfried (ed.), *The Romans Debate*; Jervis, *The Purpose of Romans*; Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans*; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 84 (with Bibliography); Schreiner, *Romans*, 10–23.

[116] On this, see Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*, 9–15. See also a superb and well-documented argumentation on the constant threat to which Christian communities were exposed from the part of the Empire, in Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire*, 13–34.

[117] Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, 90–92.

must have been particularly well veiled if it could be uncovered only at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries.[118]

If, as Helmut Koester argues, there is a hidden political message in 1 Thessalonians, it also must be indeed hidden well.[119] It can be linked with the vocabulary used by the apostle, but not with the logic of his argumentation, which focuses on the persecution of the community (1 Thess 1–3) and on the specific problem of the postmortem fate of those who die in Christ (1 Thess 4–5). If, as Karl Donfried maintains, the death of the Thessalonians is caused by imperial persecutions, then Kim would be right in claiming that in 1 Thess 4:13–18 Paul does too little to show the reward awaiting the political martyrs from Thessalonica and Christ's victory over Caesar.[120] By the same token, in 1 and 2 Thessalonians Paul hardly criticizes the realized eschatology and the new era of bliss initiated by Augustus as opposed to Christ, a reading which is consistently espoused by Harrison.[121] J. Albert Harrill opposes the presence of the "hidden transcript" in 1 Thess 5:3, claiming that Paul uses Roman concepts related to *auctoritas* quite openly, whilst Joel White questions the interpretation of the expression *pax et securitas* present there, which does not function as a slogan or the carrier of imperial propaganda in Paul's times.[122]

Seyoon Kim criticizes as well Richard Horsley's reading of 1 Corinthians as narrowing down Paul's critique solely to the Roman Empire, which is after all only one of several forces overcome by Christ according to 1 Cor 2:8 and 15:24.[123] Horsley also distorts the meaning of the collection organized by the apostle and is unrealistic in speaking of Paul's rejection of the patron-client system, which could not be substituted with any other form of economy. An even more problematic stance is that of Elliott, who turns the cross of Christ in 1 Cor 1–4 into a political manifesto, depriving it of the sacrificial and

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[118] Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 16–21.

[119] On the discussion and critique of anti-imperial approach in Paul's correspondence with the Thessalonians, see Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 3–10.

[120] Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 7–8.

[121] Harrison, "Paul and the Imperial Gospel," 88–96. For a more extensive discussion, see Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities*, 47–95.

[122] Harrill, "Paul and Empire," 309–310; White, "'Peace and Security'," 382–395.

[123] Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 24–27.

redemptive value. While the crucified Messiah is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Cor 1:23), and while the crucifixion is the most degrading form of death, which the Romans would prefer not to even speak of publicly, a solely political interpretation of Christ's death on the cross overlooks Paul's theological argumentation in 1 Corinthians.[124]

Seyoon Kim and Lynn H. Cohick evince a similarly critical attitude towards the presence of anti-imperial script in Philippians.[125] Anti-imperial criticism here unrealistically disregards the significance of the patron-client system for the functioning of early Christian communities. What is more, it overlooks the fact that not only Augustus was worshipped in Philippi but also his spouse Livia, and thereby Christ would have to compete with her as well. According to Cohick, Philippians does not indicate in any way Paul's enmity towards the Empire; the apostle does not use any coded message here but preaches the Gospel openly. Paul implores Christians to make good use of their status as Roman citizens, similarly to how he himself resorted to it when present in Philippi (Acts 16:35–40) and may resort to it again during his trial in the court (Phil 1:22). Allan R. Bevere questions Paul's alleged construction of anti-imperial theology in yet another letter written during his imprisonment, Letter to the Colossians.[126] Engaging in a polemic with Walsh and Keesmaat, Bevere charges that these two authors minimalize the context of the epistle, impose hypothetical reconstructions on Paul's thought, overlook the absence of imperial context of the Colossian heresy, and ignore the Jewish basis and theology of the Christological hymn in Col 1:15–20.

N.T. Wright admits that the major weakness of empire criticism lies in its overlooking or simplifying of Paul's theological message.[127] Despite this, Wright, Horsley, Georgi, Koester, Elliott, Harrison, and others support the presence of anti-imperial rhetoric in Paul. N.T. Wright has tackled the subject a few times, hence it seems

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[124] See Hengel, *Crucifixion*.

[125] Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 11–16; Cohick, "Philippians and Empire," 171–178.

[126] Bevere, "Colossians," 183–193.

[127] Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 79.

worthwhile to pay attention to his argumentation. In *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, the author begins with a simple assumption: there is no ground to support a chasm between theology and society, or between religion and politics, in Paul and his contemporaries, be it Jews or representatives of Greco-Roman culture.[128] To uncover an anti-imperial rhetoric in Paul, Wright proposes an adaptation of Richard Hays's method from *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. In its light, Paul's polemic with the Empire could be confirmed by its accessibility to the readers, the number of repetitions of related vocabulary, multiple places in Paul's epistles where it appears, thematic cohesiveness with Paul's teachings, historical probability, existing interpretations, and by its contribution to uncovering fresh meanings of Paul's statements.[129] Subsequently, the author sketches a Greco-Roman and Jewish context for anti-imperial ideology to legitimize it in Paul's letters.[130] Finally, he argues for its presence in the terms such as *kyrios*, *soter*, *parousia*, *euangelion*, *dikaiosyne*, and in specific excerpts: Phil 2:6–11; 3:20–21; 1 Thess 4; 1 Cor 15, and generally in Galatians and in Romans.[131]

As argued above, Wright notes references to imperial ideology both in specific terms and in whole sections of Paul's letters. In his view, these motifs present all the features indicated by Hays, but it seems rather unlikely. Granted, imperial references are noticeable and historically probable in Paul but they do not appear as often and do not fit so well in Paul's argumentation, letters, and teachings as Wright would have it. In Phil 2:6–11 Christ, who humbles himself, serves as an example for the community riven by conflicts and division; he is not a competitor for Caesar in his aspirations for power. In his reading of the Christological hymn, Wright follows in many respects his student Peter Oaks; the latter, however, indicates the presence of imperial motifs but questions Paul's conscious polemic with

[128] Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 59–79, esp. 60. See also the author's earlier essays collected in Wright, *Pauline Perspectives*, chapters 12, 16, and 27.

[129] Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 61–62.

[130] Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 62–69.

[131] Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 70–79.

the Empire.[132] By the same token, Phil 3:20–21 points to the heavens as a destination that Paul and the believers aspire to reach; they do not wish to fight their current homeland or Rome as such, but rather all that Paul calls life in accord with the world. Paul uses as a negative example those who worship their stomach, who take pride in what they should be ashamed of, and whose aspirations are of earthly nature (Phil 3:19). These general statements do not seem to evoke in any particular way Caesar or the Empire. Diction itself is not sufficient to consider Phil 2:6–11 and 3:20–21, or 1 Thess 4:13–17 and Letter to the Romans as examples of anti-imperial rhetoric. The terms used by Paul are quite common and appear as well in papyruses and many other extra-imperial contexts.[133]

Wright devotes even more space to a discussion of Paul's anti-imperial polemic in his monumental study *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*.[134] In the chapter titled "The Lion and the Eagle: Paul in Caesar's Empire," he develops the argument voiced in his earlier work and responds to John Barclay's criticism of his reading of Paul's anti-imperial rhetoric.[135] Wright reiterates two broad historical and cultural reasons recommending the employment of the imperial context in interpreting Paul's texts. The first is the apostle's Jewish background, exhibiting two differing approaches to pagans. One of them suggests that the chosen nation was to be ruled by pagan nations by God's decree and that Jews were to live as good citizens while at the same time keeping loyalty to their Covenant with the Lord (Jer 29:4–7; Dan 1–6). In accord with the other stance, there will be a day when God defeats pagan rulers, liberating Israel and

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[132] Oakes, *Philippians*, 147–174, 175–210. See also Oakes, "Re-Mapping the Universe," 320.

[133] Porter, *The Apostle Paul*, 22. The terms like *euangelion* or *kyrios* are also loaded with content that differentiates them from the imperial message. See e.g., Beker, *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel*; Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels*; Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Inspiration and Truth*, § 39–42, 91–95; Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 120–140; Pitre – Barber – Kincaid, *Paul, a New Covenant Jew*.

[134] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1271–1319.

[135] On this criticism, see Barclay, *Pauline Churches*, 363–388. On the Wright–Barclay debate, see Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire*, 5–13.

establishing his kingdom (Jer 50–51; Dan 7; Wis 6:1–6).[136] The second argument for the sake of reading Paul from the perspective of anti-imperial rhetoric is the popularity of emperors' cult, which Paul himself draws attention to in 1 Cor 8:5 when he speaks of numerous gods worshipped in Corinth, including Caesar and his family.[137] When it comes to the apostle himself, two issues make him prone to confrontation with Rome: 1) developing communities whose loyalty to Christ, fellowship, and solidarity constitute a challenge to other forms of communal life and draw the Romans' attention, resulting in persecution under Nero; and 2) Christian narration of the cosmic and universal reign of Christ, which modifies Jewish narrative of God's victory, transporting it from the past to the present and constituting a challenge to similar imperial ideas. Only one of these narrations could be true, which naturally led to conflicts between Paul and the Empire.[138]

In light of such historical and theological context, Wright is quite radical in arguing that Rome and Caesar are not mere addition to the vaster pantheon criticized by Paul or a mere embodiment of evil powers, but the major goal of the apostle's attack.[139] Further, the author proceeds to discuss Paul's texts that corroborate not only the existence (1 Cor 2:6–8; 8:5; 10:20) but also inferiority, powerlessness, subjugation, and even defeat, disarmament, and derision of authorities and powers, including Caesar himself (Rom 8:38–39; Eph 1:20–22; Col 1:15–16; 2:14–15).[140] In Wright's opinion, the fact that Caesar is placed among other rulers in itself suggests relativization of his position and power (which does not need to be true, cf. Caesars placed along other gods in imperial representations). One can agree with Wright that these powers cannot be represented as purely spiritual and will be subjugated by the Messiah.[141]

In his reading of Paul's texts, Wright repeatedly argues for the presence of a modified Jewish model there: Christians must live as

[136] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1274–1275.
[137] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1275–1276.
[138] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1277–1282.
[139] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1283.
[140] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1284–1286.
[141] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1286–1288.

good citizens, aware of the fact that the day of the Messiah's victory has already taken place. The author describes it as "the new form of the Jewish political paradox."[142] Instead of living as a community in exile, the believers live as a community of the victorious Messiah, who judged the world and its rulers, who already rules, and who will return one day to completely transform the human universe. Wright makes a reservation that such an understanding does not amount to circumscribing Paul's theology to anti-imperial rhetoric.[143] It rather takes into consideration both the Jewish and Greco-Roman context of the apostle's thought. To conclude, the author maintains that the Gospel of Jesus Christ delegitimizes and overthrows the gospel of Caesar, whose rhetoric serves idolatry and is an expression of arrogant rebellion of the creation against its Creator. Paul does not espouse the idea of revolution with the use of force, but describes a revolution that has already occurred through Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.[144]

Wright's unwavering espousal of anti-imperial rhetoric in Paul has generated criticism of John Barclay, which the former addresses in his *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. Wright enumerates the ideas that both scholars agree on: the contextualization of emperors' cult within the broader spectrum of pagan cults; Paul's varied assessment of Roman rule, which is far from one-sided (Rom 13; Col 1), or the apostle's rejection of mental and practical aspects of life related to symbolic structures of this world for the sake of new reality in Christ.[145] Barclay's criticism of Wright's arguments essentially comes down to the latter's excessive focus on Rome and Paul's polemic with the Empire. According to Barclay, Rome is not an important historical agent and as such is not particularly significant to Paul, as it serves other, way more powerful forces.[146] Wright disagrees, arguing that Rome functions as the apotheosis of the pagan world, an important reference point for Paul, which is also referenced by

[142] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1299. On the Jewishness of Paul and his imperial setting, see also Punt, "Paul's Jewish Identity," 245–271.

[143] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1299.

[144] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1306–1307.

[145] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1307–1309.

[146] Barclay, *Pauline Churches*, 384–386.

the Gospels' writers (Mark 15:39) and by Jewish apocalyptic authors (Qumran; 4 Ezra).[147] Barclay also criticizes conclusions on the anti-imperial polemic drawn on the basis of vocabulary used, such as *kyrios*, *parousia*, etc., which may assume various meanings and may appear in various contexts. According to Wright, who agrees with this point, Barclay still overlooks a broader narrative in which such vocabulary appears, such as Phil 2:6–11, legitimizing Christ's rule.[148]

Ultimately, in light of the absence of clear references to imperial ideology in Paul, Barclay criticizes Wright's deployment of Hays's criteria as methodologically inaccurate.[149] He also takes other authors, such as Horsley and Elliott, to task for uncovering the alleged hidden anti-imperial transcript in the apostle, implying such an approach as unjustified in Wright as well. According to Barclay, Philo, Flavius Josephus, and Tacitus criticize the Empire and its idolatry openly.[150] Finally, in Barclay's view, Paul confronts Augustus and Caesars without devoting a lot of attention to them, reducing them to the status of other rulers and perceiving them as only one of many manifestations of evil present in the world.[151] In response to these charges, Wright defends his methodology, claiming that in using veiled anti-imperial criticism Paul finds himself in a different situation than Philo, Flavius Josephus, or Tacitus. He is more than just an itinerant, property-less apostle, devoid of any significant social position. He is a shepherd of churches that may misread his argument as a call to arms and as a result become subject to Roman persecution.[152] In Wright's view, reducing Rome to the role of other similar evil powers does not detract from its significance. At the same time, he believes that this Empire surpassed others in idolizing their rulers, shaping narrative of universal justice, peace, and prosperity, and demanding complete submission to its ideology.[153]

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[147] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1310–1312.

[148] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1312–1313.

[149] Barclay, *Pauline Churches*, 380.

[150] Barclay, *Pauline Churches*, 381–382. With reference to Philo, *Leg.* 357; Flavius Josephus, *Ap.* 2.75; Tacitus, *Agric.* 30.5.

[151] Barclay, *Pauline Churches*, 386–387.

[152] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1315.

[153] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1318.

Barclay raises a few important issues, such as legitimacy of Hays's criteria or vocabulary being the basis for the theory on Paul's anti-imperial stance. Admitting that vocabulary in itself is not a sufficient argument, Wright points to a broader narrative in Phil 2:6–11, which in his view addresses legitimization of Christ's power and alludes to similar patterns of legitimization of Caesars' authority. Firstly, it should be restated that this is not Paul's narrative; the apostle in Phil 2:6–11 presents Christ as a model for the community and not as a competitor for Caesar. Secondly, the story of Christ's crucifixion is in diametrical opposition to the Roman *cursus honorum*. At the same time, however, Barclay seems to be too radical in claiming that Rome is an insignificant agent on the stage of universal history controlled by higher, spiritual sources. As Wright rightly notes, Barclay risks moving to apocalyptic positions in the manner of Martyn, severed from historical realities of Paul's times.

4. Conclusions

What position should one assume when faced with Barclay's and Wright's diametrically opposite assessments of empire criticism in Paul? There is some middle ground between the Scylla and Charybdis these two authors represent. It is certain that taking into consideration the cult of Caesar contributes to a better historical contextualization of Paul's letters. It likewise finds a parallel in the Jewish attitude to the Empire, which is critical especially in the prophetic and apocalyptic movements.[154] In 4 Ezra, penned at the turn of the 1st and the 2nd century CE, which the title of this article alludes to, the penultimate vision shows the Roman three-headed eagle that emerges from the sea to be ultimately attacked and burnt by the lion coming out of the thick woods, which symbolizes the Messiah of Israel.[155] Could Christians associate this Messiah with Christ? Were Christians from Rome, Corinth, and Philippi familiar with Jewish apocalyptic images and were they interested in Israel's final victory? This raises some doubts.

[154] On this, see Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*.

[155] On the dating and text of 4 Ezra, see Metzger, "The Fourth Book of Ezra," 517–559.

N.T. Wright seems to simply transfer Jewish anti-imperial theology onto Paul, who allegedly sees Christ as the destroyer of empires foretold by Jewish writings. There is no obvious connection between Paul and Jewish apocalyptic literature that would enable one to argue for the apostle's borrowing from and developing of Jewish ideas.[156] Being a representative of *New Perspective*, Wright does the right thing reading Paul in the Jewish context, yet his reading is too schematic. His take does not do justice to the originality of the apostle's thought stemming from his experience of Christ.

Seyoon Kim enumerates several methodological problems related to empire criticism, including Sandmel's well-known "parallelomania," connecting the meaning of individual terms with their imperial context and then imposing this context on the whole letter, or the mysterious "hidden transcript" that is uncovered only by contemporary readers.[157] Its thorough critique was conducted in monograph by Christoph Heilig, who subsequently supplemented and nuanced his initial approach with another publication on the issue, written in a critical dialog with Laura Robinson.[158] Harrison himself, opting for the presence of a conscious anti-imperial script in Paul, postulates restricted use of the so-called "hidden transcript" in the apostle on account of various groups of Paul's recipients that may not have felt comfortable with the criticism of Caesar, for example – slaves in his house.[159] In his view, Paul's criticism of Julio-Claudian power requires a nuanced approach. The apostle needs to negotiate between various members of the community and their diverse attitudes to the authority of the emperors. One also needs to take

[156] A similar comment may be made on White, who identifies in Paul's texts eschatological notions derived from the Book of Daniel. See White, "Anti-Imperial Subtexts," 316–333.

[157] Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 28–33. See also Burk, "Is Paul's Gospel Counter-imperial?," 315–322, 326–328.

[158] See Heilig, *Hidden Criticism?*; Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire*, 13–54. On the low probability of the presence of "hidden transcript" in Paul from the perspective of the character of the Roman state and the practices of its officials, see Robinson, "Hidden Transcripts?," 55–72.

[159] Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities*, 28–33.

into consideration the differences between the eastern and western parts of the Empire in the approach to the imperial cult.[160]

According to Kim, empire criticism is difficult to accept also on account of absence of Paul's critical statements on the Empire, lack of references in his letters to imperial cult (with the exception of 2 Thess 2:3–12), or the notoriously difficult fragment of Rom 13:1–7, in which Paul accepts the Roman order that enables his mission.[161] In the author's view, Paul exhibits a positive attitude to Roman courts, successfully defends his case in front of them, and even appeals to Caesar (Acts 25:11) in the hope that the emperor will confirm that his Gospel does not constitute a threat to the order of the Empire. The apostle does not fight Rome but concentrates on preaching the Good News; his Christ-like ethics of perseverance in the face of persecution, of forgiveness and not reacting with violence to evil do not really fit well with the anti-imperial script.[162] Kim likewise posits lack of anti-imperial rhetoric in the early Christian church, e.g. in Clement of Rome or Tertullian, who prayed for the rulers, worshipping them as holding the second position after God.[163] Fight with the Empire, even a veiled one, would constitute a grave risk for young Christian communities. Rome could only respond with the sword to their ungrateful subjects that did not acknowledge her benefactions.

Ultimately, Caesar became interested in Christians. They had been sufficiently well known and hated by the time of the infamous fire of Rome in 64 CE, when Nero turned them into public scapegoats. This fact can be explained not so much by the opposition to the Empire expressed by the authors of the New Testament – whether overtly or covertly – but by the character of the Gospel and early Christian communities. Demanding first and foremost obedience and loyalty to Christ, they relativized the power of the Empire and exposed the idolatrous character of emperors' worship. Paul preached Christ as the Lord that subjugates all power, including Roman one. At the same time he was perfectly aware that to survive in the Greco-Roman

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[160] Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities*, 44.
[161] Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 34–43.
[162] Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 43–58.
[163] Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 60–64.

environment he needed to acknowledge the authority of the Empire and show general acceptance of its social system.[164] Traces of such a strategy are noticeable in his letters, for example in 1 Cor 7; 11:2–16; and 14:34–35. According to Anders Klostergaard Petersen, in Rom 13:1–7 Paul announces peace with the surrounding Greco--Roman world and its social organization, while Niko Huttunen reads the apostle here as open to the Greco-Roman society and as positively assessing Roman power, which is also to serve the common good and protection of the weak.[165] Porter concurs that in 1 Cor 7; 2 Cor 8; or Rom 13:1–7 Paul refers to Roman laws and institutions, not rejecting them but re-interpreting and substituting Roman hierarchical structure – based on status and the patron-client system – with God's hierarchy, having Christ on its top.[166] Christians were to change the world not in a violent manner but from within, by living the life filled with the Gospel's values. The strategy can be termed as the building of an alternative society and its aim is to convince the broadest possible group of recipients to accept the Gospel in hope of the future transformation of the existing social system.[167]

Even if it is difficult to see an openly anti-imperial rhetoric in Paul, the Gospel that he preaches indeed has a power to overthrow empires. Paul describes it in Rom 1:16–17 as a carrier of God's *dynamis*, leading the whole humanity to salvation. If salvation is understood, as it should be, as more than only a spiritual event, it encompasses human life in its totality, including social, economic, and political dimensions.[168] Reading Paul in the context of anti-imperial

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[164] This argument was taken up by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in their analysis of difficult texts on gender roles in Col 3:18, Eph 5:22–33, and Tit 2:5. See Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Inspiration and Truth*, § 132. See also Thorsteinsson, *Roman Christianity*, 99; Huttunen, "Imagination Made Real," 124

[165] Klostergaard Petersen, "Imperial Politics in Paul," 123; Huttunen, "Imagination Made Real," 125–127. On the positive outlook on Roman power in Rom 13:1–7, see also White, "Anti-Imperial Subtexts," 306–307.

[166] Porter, "Paul Confronts Caesar," 189–192; Porter, *The Apostle Paul*, 23.

[167] Robbins, The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse, 169.

[168] Inseparability of politics and religion as well as a complicated process of negotiating with the ideology of the Empire forms the basis for Punt's support of empire criticism in: Punt, "Paul the Jew," 1–17.

rhetoric has a profound sense, but it should be done critically. It should be remembered that polemic with the Empire does not lie at the heart of the apostle's argumentative strategy, but derives from the character of his Gospel and the role attributed to Christ. In light of this, it should not be ascribed a significant role in his letters, nor should they be treated as addressing primarily political and social issues. The mistake of artificially imposing an overall anti-imperial narrative on Paul's epistles can be clearly seen in Georgi, Koester, Elliott, Harrison, and Wright.

Further, to assess the validity of empire criticism, one needs to take into consideration the fact that it reflects our contemporary worldviews. Wright himself admits that, while McKnight and Modica argue that "Paul in politics" has fallen victim to American culture wars, postcolonial debates, as well as liberal, left-leaning, and neo-Marxist ideologies.[169] Speaking of anti-imperial rhetoric in Paul, one may easily advance their own agenda and ideological stance. Finally, Paul intentionally used general language that may be read as criticizing the empires of all times. He employs a similar technique while speaking of his enemies in 2 Corinthians.[170] The fact that their identity is not revealed underscores the importance of Paul's exposition of the Gospel and his vision of his apostolate in Corinth. This does not mean, however, that his enemies are of no importance to him. On the contrary, they constitute a negative background enabling an even clearer presentation of Paul's Gospel. In a similar vein, Caesar is only – or as much as – the background for Christ's Gospel.

Some ancient readers may have read Pauline letters as containing anti-imperial criticism. They could have been read in this way also by the imperial apparatus that responded by persecuting the early Christian church. Above all, emperors' cult is a valuable and historically accurate background for showing the novelty of Christianity and worship of Christ. This provides a compelling

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[169] Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 308; McKnight – Modica, "Introduction," 20. On this, see also Burk, "Is Paul's Gospel Counterimperial?," 309–314, 322–326, 328–330.

[170] See Kowalski, *Transforming Boasting of Self*, 158–171.

reason for carefully employing the approach in the reading of Pauline letters. N.T. Wright claims that empire criticism is a relatively new area of biblical scholarship and hopes it will gain more currency.[171] Even if not in the form proposed by Wright, the approach definitely has a potential that should be put to use in the New Testament scholarship.[172] Having said that, intertextuality seems to be too limited a methodological basis for empire criticism, since the interaction with Rome took place in the spheres of the spoken word, everyday life, economy, religion, architecture, monuments, inscriptions and geography, which only to some extent were reflected in texts and also require attention.[173] Empire criticism ultimately challenges us to come up with a more dynamic concept of the Roman Empire, one that transcends state and power structures and embraces vast socio-cultural spheres of influence. The first Christians and Jews did not take an unequivocally negative attitude towards them, but rather engaged in a complicated process of negotiations and compromises, which resulted in establishing their own, diversified positions.[174] Empire criticism understood and practiced in such a nuanced manner can definitely contribute to a better understanding of the New Testament environment and the message of Paul's letters.[175]

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[171] Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 79.

[172] See the use of empire criticism in other NT writings in: Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*; Carter, *Matthew and Empire*; Friesen, *Imperial Cults*; Riches – Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew*; Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*; Carter, *John and Empire*; Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 75–199; Yamazaki-Ransom, *The Roman Empire in Luke's Narrative*; Porter – Long Westfall, *Empire in the New Testament*; Esterline – Lee – Rhoads, *Luke–Acts and Empire*; Leander, *Discourses of Empire*; Seo, *Luke's Jesus in the Roman Empire*; Wood, *The Alter-Imperial Paradigm*.

[173] Bird, *An Anomalous Jew*, 225–226.

[174] Punt, "Paul's Jewish Identity," 251–255.

[175] For more holistic remarks on how to do biblical exegesis in the context of empire criticism, see Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire*, ch. 5 (pp. 102–134). The author also gives a good example of such exegesis in the previous ch. 3 and 4 (pp. 55–101).

Lew kontra orzeł: Krytyczna ocena anty-imperialnej metody czytania św. Pawła

Abstrakt: Artykuł stanowi syntetyczną analizę krytyki imperialnej w listach św. Pawła. Autor rozpoczyna od ukazania wszechobecności i charakteru kultu imperialnego w czasach apostoła. Następnie naświetla miejsca w listach św. Pawła, które zazwyczaj wiąże się z antyimperialną retoryką Pawła. W kolejnej części poddaje krytyce argumenty wysuwane za obecnością skryptu antyimperialnego we wskazanych listach. W konkluzjach autor krytycznie odnosi się do metodologii i przesłanek krytyki imperialnej, która zasadniczo lekceważy kontekst argumentacyjny Pawła, odwołuje się do problematycznego „ukrytego zapisu" i bywa mocno zideologizowana. Według autora apostoł nie walczy z Imperium, akceptując jego instytucje i porządek społeczny oraz próbując je zmieniać od środka. Choć Paweł świadomie nie operuje skryptem anty-imperialnym, Dobra Nowina i zakładane przez niego wspólnoty posiadają jednak anty-imperialny potencjał. To sprawia, że autor ostatecznie opowiada się za ostrożnym zastosowaniem krytyki imperialnej, która może służyć lepszemu zrozumieniu tła kulturowego Nowego Testamentu i przesłania listów św. Pawła.

Słowa kluczowe: listy Pawła, krytyka imperialna, kult imperialny, retoryka antyimperialna, „ukryty zapis"

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