The New Testament and empire:
on the importance of theory[1]

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Abstract

Discussions on the relationship between empires and
biblical texts can benefit greatly from the theorisation of
empire. It entails perceiving empire as a constantly constructed
entity, by both the powerful and the subjugated, as well as the
concomitant responses situated in attraction to and subversion
of empire, i.e. its negotiation. The discussion is primarily rela-
ted to the 1st century CE context, but finds important socio-
rhetorical antecedents in ancient Israelite history and textual
traditions.

Introduction

Theorising empire amidst contemporary talk of empire needs more than the
prevailing overwhelming focus on its military or political-economic
underpinnings. It should also move beyond the celebratory, sensational or even
anti-sociological approaches found in popular culture. Accountable, anthropo-
logical approaches to empire, alert also to the cultural making of value and of
viewing empire as more than an elitist project, can rather focus on people-
centred and contextualised understandings of empire. As one scholar has
argued, it is important "to question the singular thingness that the term empire
suggests by identifying the many fissures, contradictions, historical particular-
rities, and shifts in imperial processes" (Lutz 2006:593).

The all-pervasive Roman imperial presence evidently informed the
consciousness of people around the Mediterranean in the first century CE. Not
only material or historical imperialism but discursive imperialism determined
the daily lives of people in a myriad of ways, also at the level of consciousness,
in terms of ideology. A territorial understanding of empire which required force
for its maintenance was always an important facet of the Roman Empire, but
for the largest part it was sustained through hegemony, reliant upon power to

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[1]   Another version of the argument in this article will be published in *HTS Theological
     Studies/Teologiese Studies* (Punt 2011a).

achieve and maintain its authority and control. In fact, the Romans sustained and wielded their *imperium* through a combination of (the always available recourse to) force and ideological propaganda extolling the perceived benefits of empire. Like other empires, earlier and later, it propounded a sense of moral virtue, and claimed to operate with a vision of re-ordering the world's power relations for the sake and betterment of all.

Given the apocalyptic framework of many New Testament texts, and increasing recognition for a general antipathy towards the designs of the Roman Empire, the relation between empire and early followers of Jesus have been traced in different ways.[2] Some scholars rightly issue a warning to avoid anachronism, not to portray Jesus and his followers as freedom fighters who along modern lines of thinking are believed to have their eyes set on reshaping social reality. However, claims such as "Jesus and the prophetic tradition, however, show no interest in structures, democratic or any other. They are only interested in *how* power is exercised, and *to what end*" (Bryan 2005:127), tend to, illegitimately and in a way foreign to the ancient time, divorce agency and purpose from institution. Such claims seem to presuppose contemporary structural change as a possibility, notwithstanding the autocratic, at best oligarchic, rule of the empire, whether directly through its administrative and military apparatus or through its local representatives, in a hierarchically ordered world.

Trying to understand the construal and nature of the relationship between biblical texts[3] (New Testament texts in particular) and empire, this contribution attempts to formulate some broad perimeters for discussing empire. The focus is on how texts can be seen as relating to or even interacting with empire, when empire is understood as a multifaceted entity. While

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[2]　Tracing this relationship is burdened by many assumptions and dangers, some of which include: using the text as a window on the world, with all the dangers of representation, etc imminently present; danger of circle argumentation, where the texts are enlisted to conjure up a socio-historical context, against which the very same texts are interpreted; and so forth. Cf. the two typically modern dangers offered by Wright (2005:59-60) to avoid when thinking about first-century politics: a fixed map of post-Enlightenment political option on a left-to-right sliding scale; and, the separation of domains of life, such as theology and society, or religion and politics. Also, the texts are not indicative of either a simple or once-off engagement, in a straightforward manner, with empire; whether subversively kicking against the shins of empire or walking hand in hand with it; but they are in their constant engagement with empire co-constituting it in their own ways. On the one hand, the empire of the texts was not the mirror-image of empire, an attempt to present the real thing (one-on-one representation); on the other hand, empire was as much material reality as continuously reconstructed and refurbished, by its originators and supporters as much as by its distracters (not either material or notional, but both material-real and pliable-morphing).

[3]　Empires in biblical texts include a wide variety: Assyrians; Babylonian; Persian; Macedonian; Greco-Egyptians; Greco-Syrians; Romans (cf. Crossan 2007:82). Cf. Carter (2006:14-16) for a brief (and maybe too nostalgic) presentation of Israel's past history with empires of various origins and kinds.

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interactions with the Roman Empire as gleaned from the New Testament were hardly univocal or monolithic, it is suggested that two non-exclusive and broad categories are useful to describe reactions to empire in these texts: a position of subversion and an attitude of attraction. But to situate the discussion and to explain the concern with adequately framing discussions of empire, a short (but orientating) detour through ancient Israelite traditions may be appropriate.

Ancient Israelite (messianic) traditions

By the first century CE, the history and traditions of the Jewish people were marked by the subjugation, domination and coercion of foreign powers in many forms and guises, and form a distinct part of the interpretative horizon of the New Testament texts' encounter with empire. Apart from a relatively short period of independence during the rule of David and Solomon, their traditions include the formative years of enslavement in Egypt and of exile in Babylon, and even during times of self-rule, the threat of foreign powers were almost always on the horizon. As Israel perceived itself to be the chosen people of God, their subjugation was also a theological problem (Bryan 2005:13). An important part of Jewish tradition included the prophetic traditions of criticism of and resistance against pagan rulers and even their own Jewish counterparts accused of dancing to the tunes of foreign powers (cf. Amos). In Isaiah 40–55 the foreign, pagan religion and imperial power it sustained is consistently mocked and denounced. And in Daniel the foreign powers and their religious pretentions were scorned, particularly in comparison with the exceptional qualities of the resisting Jewish heroes; Daniel portrays most decisively the fall and destruction of four successive pagan empires. In some instances the foreign powers were presented by the prophets as acting as instruments in the hands of God, as in the case of the Persian Cyrus (cf. Am 1:3–2:8; Isa 10:5–19), constituting fellowship between a pagan empire and God's people[4] (Wright 2005:65–69; cf. Bryan 2005:16).

    The nature of the criticism of and attack on the foreign powers and their exploits is not as uncomplicated as modern readers may have wished. Daniel and his friends became the trusted and loyal civil servants of the very imperial force which sought to destroy them. In Jeremiah the exiles settled down, seeking the well-being of Babylon. While Moses's position in the Pharaoh's court may have been incidental, the portrayal of Joseph and his family at an earlier period suggested cooperation and integration rather than antagonism.

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[4]   A pattern also found in extra-biblical literature; in *The Letter of Aristeas* Ptolemy Philadelphus is presented not only as a philanthropic, caring monarch but also one who acted as partner of God – although some caution is advised, given the Jewish diaspora context in Egypt and the close collaboration that existed between the Ptolemeans and the Jews (cf.. Bryan 2005:17).

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Rather than simply describing such interconnected relations as contradictory or absurd, they call for greater recognition of the nature of the socio-political context of antiquity; as one scholar has phrased it: "Radical subversion of pagan political systems does not mean support for anarchy" (Wright 2005:66). On the contrary, the early Jewish people seemed able to live with what would today be experienced as unbearable incongruities, a situation that can be understood to some extent by acknowledging the theology that informed their thinking.[5]

Whether theological explanations are sufficient for dealing with the incongruences and ambiguities of imperial engagement is another question. More to the point, to acknowledge this rich heritage in the New Testament does not immediately suggest how to account for it![6] On the one hand, the ancient Israelite traditions of prophetic resistance against the authorities of the day, and the rise of popular leaders speaking out on behalf of the people, informed the messianic traditions of first century Jewish people. It has been argued that, more than providing the broad, general context for understanding Jesus, these traditions also provided the "social 'scripts' or roles", such as popular messiah or popular prophet, with which Jesus could have communicated with and related to people[7] (Horsley 2008). On the other hand, others argue "that Jesus and the early Christians did indeed have a critique of the Roman superpower, a critique that was broadly in line with the entire biblical and prophetic tradition" (Bryan 2005:9), but that it did not translate into notions of political sedition, subverting or replacing empires, but rather provided a rhetorical insistence on ensuring good government.

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[5] A strong belief in creation, fall and providence saw full control in the hands of the one God who had created all, even the pagan rulers, and who exerted his power in mysterious ways notwithstanding the pagan rulers' apparent victories from time to time. The emphasis on God's intended punishment for the wickedness of the rulers of the world was matched by God's wish for a world ruled effectively, without anarchy and chaos – none of which implied any compromises with paganism (Wright 2005:66). Whether this supposedly established a "basic pattern" that "Biblical and prophetic tradition taken as a whole is not at all interested in the forms or structures of earthly power, in the choice of one system of government over another, or even in the question as to whether those who rule are believers or pagan" (Bryan 2005:22) is probably too unqualified and an unsustainable generalisation.

[6] It is important to account also for the early first-century CE arrangements made between the Romans and the Jews, after the deposition of Archelaus in 6 CE at the request of the Jews and which led until 39 CE to Judea being under direct Roman rule. Jews were allowed to practise their religion in accordance with the same guarantees that Julius Caesar and Augustus granted to diaspora Jews earlier; in exchange, the Jews made a daily sacrifice of two lambs and a bull for the emperor in the Temple (Philo, *Leg.* 157, 232, 317; Josephus, *War* 2.197, 407; cf. Bryan 2005:27).

[7] "Jesus spoke and acted out of a long tradition of previous profanation of the Temple, high priesthood, and sacred rituals of subordination by Israelite prophets who claimed divine inspiration" (Horsley 2008).

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Two emerging concerns will receive further attention below. Firstly, the need to move beyond an essentialist understanding of empire, to theorise empire as both dynamic and primarily a process,[8] in its conceptualising as well as negotiating: complicated interrelations in the end actually constitute empire. Secondly, interactions with and relations to empire are equally dynamic, but in another sense: rather than simplistic, static positions "for" or "against", people's responses to and interactions with empire are infinitely more complex and hybrid than merely support or opposition.

Empire in the first century CE

Empire in New Testament times entailed more than overt categories of imperial structures, systems and mechanisms. Not discounting their importance, however, the often complex nature of and involvement with a range of other related and (for our context) unrelated properties already make their description difficult. The imperial presence and power is often intimately related to other (non-imperial) structures and systems on various social, economic and political levels of first-century society, and is a further challenge for adequately accounting for the reach and impact of the Roman Empire. And the unrelenting, pervasive ideological influence of empire, interconnected with almost all dimensions of first-century life across the geographical spread of communities of people, requires a broad spectrum approach; or, to put it differently, adequate theorisation!

Theoretical considerations regarding the Roman Empire

The analysis of the Roman Empire in considering possible links in New Testament texts, involves at least three dimensions of empire studies. Empire is a "structural reality" which is comprised of and operates in terms of a principal binary (Segovia uses "binomial") of centre and margins, where centre is often symbolised by a city and margins are that which is subordinated to the centre, be they at a political, economic or cultural level.[9] Secondly and notwith-

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[8]   The disinclination towards an essentialist understanding does not have to imply a disavowal of any real life, flesh and blood entities (so Roth 2003). Non-essentialism is better understood as scepticism about sure categories (cf. Brown 2001:44), i e to view social phenomena in terms of transhistorical essences, independent of conscious beings, and disallowing people's determination of the categorical structure of reality.

[9]   From this key binary, other binaries soon follow: civilised/uncivilised; advanced/primitive; cultured/barbarian; progressive/backward; developed/undeveloped or underdeveloped. In the discussion of Rome and its role and impact on the communities of the early followers of Jesus, the city of Rome constitutes such a metropolitan or rather imperial centre; and areas such as western and in particular eastern parts of the ancient world, including subcontinents such as Asia, comprised the peripheral areas (Friesen 2001:17).

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standing its structural reality, empire is not a uniform phenomenon in a temporal or spatial sense, but in fact is "differentiated in constitution and deployment" regardless of many remaining similarities.[10] In the third place, the reach and power of empire is of such an extent that it influences and impacts in direct and indirect, in overt and subtle ways, "the entire artistic production of center and margins, of dominant and subaltern, including their respective literary productions" (Segovia 1998:56–57).

Material aspects of empire in the first century CE

The Roman Empire was in the first century CE co-constituted by a number of important interlinking, overlapping and (even) inchoate lines[11] including a centralised seat of ultimate power and military conquest, the system of patronage, the rhetoric of peace,[12] prosperity and concord, and the imperial cult (cf. also Horsley 1997:87–90; 2000:74-82). In fact, subsequent to the success of military conquest, it would be the rhetoric of empire that continuously inscribed and replicated the language of power and domination required for maintaining the empire.

The *overt manifestation* of empire had its basis in Roman power primarily situated in its vast military force in the form of generally well-trained and -resourced legions which operated both ruthlessly and efficiently. Punishment for dissention and sedition was harsh, and the cross was the ultimate symbol of Roman power and cruel brutality. Its justice was not limited to foreigners and lower classes but at times even held Roman provincial governors accused of wrongdoing accountable before the courts. Roman taxes were ruthlessly imposed, and while legitimised as recompense for receiving privileges wrought

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[10]   "Every empire is imperial in its own distinctive way" since "[t]here are empires such as the Ottoman, based on a common religious faith, and there are religiously tolerant, pagan, and even largely secular empires, such as Rome became in its grandest centuries. There are short-lived empires, based, like that of Alexander the Great, upon raw military power. And there are empires that thrive for centuries, usually because, like Rome and Carthage, they achieve commercial prosperity that can enlist the allegiance of far-flung economic elites, or because they establish a professional civil service, an imperial governing class" (Walker 2002:40).

[11]   Some scholars rightly warn against a simplistic equation of all forms of Roman internal rule as empire: "It is probably more appropriate to call the different forms of Roman internal rule 'republic' and 'principate', since even before the emergence of the 'emperors' of Rome, the Romans controlled foreign territories, and this could be called 'empire'" (Hollingshead 1998:26 n14)

[12]   Concepts such as peace were of course filled out differently by those from within and outside the Empire; Tacitus puts the following words in the mouth of the British rebel commander Calgacus about the Romans: "To robbery, butchery and rapine, they give the name of 'governmen''; they create a desolation and call it 'peace'" (in Hollingshead 1998:26 n16).

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by empire such as peace and security or freedom and justice, they often served to increase the magnificence and opulence of the elite who ultimately and truly benefited from imperial machinations.[13]

Local elites were the cutting edge of empire and its public face for the majority of people in New Testament times, an indispensible aspect of the imperial machinery.[14] Through their "government without bureaucracy" (Garnsey & Saller 1987:20–40), the Roman Empire yielded administrative authority[15] to indigenous elites which had a twofold purpose.[16] On the one hand, the local elites played the important role of keeping the imperial wheels turning in many ways, including that they ensured the collection of tribute, organised business and politics, and garnered support for empire through bestowing benevolence and public works programmes. On the other hand, the elites were an important aspect of the imperial divide-and-rule politics (Moore 2006b:199), since popular resentment and even uprisings could be blamed on them while the imperial powers retained ultimate authority by remaining remote and unavailable.[17] This meant that rather than trying to understand the nature of the empire with an inward-looking perspective, a measure more appropriate for the Republic, the empire first has to be understood from the outside, from the provinces and then looking inward (Millar 1966:166).

Patronage is another cultural-convictional or ideological aspect that manifested in very material ways as part of empire's overt appearance. Criss-crossing through various socio-political, economic and cultural systems and structures, the importance of the patronage system stood firm in its vastness, making its importance difficult to overrate. Patronage functioned within the context of the Emperor as ultimate patron, who devolved his power to other

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[13]   The ambiguity is well represented in the following comment: "Rome's system of justice – which, to be fair, was often a considerable improvement on the local systems over which it superimposed itself – supplied tribunals and courts of law answerable, ultimately, to the emperor himself" (Wright 2005:64).

[14]   The incorporation of local elites, and their collusion with Empire, fitted into a broader Roman practice: "In practical terms, the Roman way was dominant because the Romans exercised political control of the region, but the Romans never set out to eliminate the cultures they absorbed" (Hollingshead 1998:14).

[15]   Roman "administration" may be a misleading term, as Millar (1966:166) argues, since it was "not an arrangement of compartments, of administrative hierarchies, but an array of institutions, communities and persons, the relations between which depended on political and diplomatic choices which could be made by any of the parties".

[16]   "We hear much of such elite γένη in the Roman period, since Rome extended its rule over the Greek world by forging alliances between its aristocracy and the Greek elites" (Stowers 1995:317). The γένος or clan was "a locative sacrificing kinship group larger than the οἶκος but smaller and less diverse than a phratry" (Stowers 1995:315–316)

[17]   In exceptional circumstances, such as the Jewish war in 66 CE, "the ultimate authority finds it necessary temporarily to relinquish its godlike remoteness and relative invisibility in order to intervene decisively and irresistibly in the corrupt affairs of its creatures in an attempt to contain the chaos that its own administrative policies has created" (Moore 2006b:199).

patrons, each with a circle of influence as well as groups of underling-patrons, continuing in a never-ending extension of the patronage system (cf. Chow 1997). Indeed, "[f]ar from trying to eradicate traditional patronage relationships, emperors encouraged their continuation, in part because they were the main mechanism for recruitment of new members of the imperial elite" (Garnsey & Saller 1987:201).

It is probably more important to understand the *ideological framework* of the Roman Empire. By the beginning of the first century, the empire had established itself as the overwhelming political power of the time, after it had conclusively dealt with its main rival, Carthage. Imperial ideology was intimately and reciprocally connected to the symbols of its power, the symbols informing ideology and the latter sustaining and providing purpose and justification for the former. Roman imperial ideology was built upon revisiting the ideals of the old republic, priding itself as a democratic institution, the pretence of which was underwritten by notions of liberty and justice.[18] Moreover, following the civil war, Augustus was often upheld as the one who brought peace, to the Roman Empire but also therefore to the world at large.[19] In the end therefore, "[f]reedom, justice, peace and salvation were the imperial themes that you could expect to meet in the mass media of the ancient world, that is, on statues, on coins, in poetry and song and speeches" (Wright 2005:63). The claims to such values and achievements were ultimately ascribed to the benevolence of the emperor, and were individually and collectively presented as euvagge,lion ("good news"),[20] the same word used of course by the early followers of Jesus for what they found in the life, work, and message of Jesus.[21]

Poets and historians like Virgil, Horace, Livy and others created in their different ways "a grand narrative of empire, a long eschatology which has now

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[18] "The republic has long prided itself on its justice, and in the middle years of Augustus' reign 'Iustitia', too, became an official goddess: Rome possessed Justice, and had the obligation to share it with the rest of the world" (Wright 2005:63).

[19] A century later Tacitus did put the accusation that the Roman created a wilderness and labelled it "peace", into the mouth of a conquered foe: the British rebel commander Calgacus (Wright 2005:63; Hollingshead 1998:26 n16).

[20] For the widespread use of the "good news" notion in ancient world, cf. the Gaius inscription (c 5 BCE) where it is claimed that Gaius Julius Caesar's coming of age was celebrated as "good news"; the Priene calendar of c 9 BCE, where it is claimed that the "birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings (εὐαγγελίων) for the world that came by reason of him"; and, Josephus' *Jewish Wars* 2.418-420 where the "terrible message" of his troops being needed to put down the sedition at the bequest of the Jewish elite was received by governor Florus as "good news" (εὐαγγέλιον).

[21] For a summary of imperial terms probably taken up and redeployed by Paul, cf. Elliott (2008:98–99).

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reached its climax".[22] In the court of Augustus the story of Rome was told along the lines of it being the culmination of a long process of training and preparation so that the empire could assume its destined role as ruler of the world.[23] The emperors themselves at times engaged in ideology-mongering, as in the case of Augustus who had his achievements on behalf of the Roman people and the world inscribed on *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* memorials. Rather than seeing his and his empire's actions as the domination and subjection of other peoples, these actions are described as bestowing on them the friendship and fidelity of the Roman people.[24] The defeat of other peoples through conquest and warfare was described as the miraculous achievement of the Pax Romana, as a world peace. The breadth and depth of the imperial ideology and propaganda meant that the Roman world was saturated "with a carefully managed repertoire of images depicting the piety and benevolent potency of the emperor, and of the routinized representations and celebrations of those virtues through a ubiquitous imperial cult" (Elliott 2007:183).

In fact, given the first-century context where political, social, cultural, religious and various other lines and concerns were interwoven, the ideological propaganda of the Romans amounted to what in our understanding can very well be referred to as Roman imperial *theology* (Crossan 2008:59–73). Not only was the Roman imperial ideology pervasive in the first-century Mediterranean world; it ensured the continued existence of the empire. Rather than military strength, the longevity and vibrancy of the Roman Empire increasingly relied upon the growing consensus that Roman rule was justified. The consensus itself was a product of the complex interaction between the centralised power of empire in Rome and its remote peripheries, the outlying provinces or colonies (Ando 2000; cf. also discussion below).

It was the *religious* dimension proper, in the third place, which has in the past for obvious reasons often attracted the attention of biblical scholars on the occasions when imperial influence was considered in studies of the New Testament. Noting the interrelationship between empire and religion, scholars

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[22] In *Aeneid* 1:255–296, Virgil portrays how in the aftermath of the Trojan War, Jove promised the goddess Venus that her beloved hero Aeneas would both found a great city and subdue the proud nations. His descendants would prosper but also control all sea and land; Romulus, one of his descendants and the legendary founder of Rome, was destined to rule forever as master of the world (cf. Elliott 2007:183).

[23] "This ideology, like most imperial rhetoric, got rewritten as the empire wore on, but managed to survive the ridiculous chaos of AD 69 and carry on well into subsequent centuries" (Wright 2005:64, cf. White 1999:110–135)

[24] "The ideology of Roman supremacy involved the inferiority of other peoples who were destined to be subservient to the Romans; within this ideology, the Jews were on occasion singled out as a people 'born to servitude'" (Elliott 2007:187).

often focused on the *emperor cult*,[25] with some maintaining that the emperor cult was the fastest growing religion by the middle of the first century CE[26] (Wright 2005:64). But few emperors attempted to claim divine honours for themselves; their insistence on the divinity of their predecessors often served to reinforce their own positions of power. This practice ensured that the claim by any given serving emperor to be a "son of god" was not uncommon at the time, even if the relationship between the emperor and predecessor was at times at most one of adoptive kinship, as in the case of Octavian/Augustus.[27]

But the emperor cult should be understood as one, albeit important, element of a much more pervasive religious dimension which was part of – and should be understood in conjunction with other aspects of – the imperial system.[28] Augustus, for example, was hailed by the contemporary poets for what was described as his remarkable and thorough piety, which was often given as the reason for his successful establishment of the empire. On the Ara Pacis, the Augustan Peace altar which was erected in the Forum in Rome, the image of the pious Trojan hero Aeneas making sacrifices on the shore of Latium was paired with a similarly pious Augustus offering sacrifices for the Roman people[29] (Elliott 2007:183). One scholar has concluded that the reason Roman Emperors became gods was twofold: "The imperial cult was primarily a sign of indifference or doubt or anxiety about the gods; it was, furthermore, an expression of admiration for efficient, but alien, rule".[30] In the eastern part of the empire, where rulers were traditionally regarded as divine, the emperor cult grew particularly strong and as a result saw cities benefit hugely by receiving various rewards. Building programmes often saw temples erected in honour of the emperor, accompanied by restructuring the city as in the case of

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[25] The emperor cult "served three main functions: the diffusion of imperial ideology, the focusing of the loyalty of subjects on the emperor and the social and political advancement of these provincials who presided over its operation" (Garnsey & Saller 1987:202). Cf. Botha (1988:87–102)

[26] The emperor cult goes back to the time of the Hellenistic kings (Momigliano 1986:183–186).

[27] Cf. the evidence in various other ancient authors pertaining to the divinity of Augustus (Priene Calendar inscription of c. 9 BCE; Virgil Aeneid 6; Virgil Eclogue 4; Suetonius Divine Augustus 94.4; Horace Odes 3.5; Epistle 2.1); cf. www.textexcavation.com/augustus.htm

[28] "[G]overnment and religion both functioned, theoretically, to secure the same ends of making life prosperous, meaningful, and happy. The gods brought peace and prosperity and made the state great. In turn, the state sponsored and encouraged the worship of gods" (Ehrman 2008:27)

[29] For the emphasis on piety, amidst public grandeur and civic works programme, in Augustus's political agenda, cf. White 1999:110–135.

[30] Given the imperial military might through which the emperor laid claim to all territory and people, "[a]s far as most of the Roman world was concerned, the 'divinity' of the emperor was obvious and uncontroversial" (Wright 2005:65; cf. Ehrman 2008:28).

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Ephesus, and by various other activities such as games, festivals and various other celebrations also in honour of the emperor.

In *conclusion*, the materiality of the Roman Empire was evident for all to see, even where it manifested in different ways and subtle frames. Ultimately, it did not have to rely on brainwashing its imperial subjects with its ideology and propaganda, or imposing the accompanying socio-cultural, political and religious rituals. Such ideological and propagandistic efforts prevailed, but likewise provincial elites were eager to develop their own versions of imperial splendour in imagery and ritual to demonstrate the new configuration of power in their cities.[31] Imperial imposition by the sword or other forms of compulsion generally proved needless, as long as the perceived benefits of imperial rule seemed to overwhelm its distractions.[32] Competition with their counterparts elsewhere over the most excellent reproduction of Caesars example of ritualised piety and benevolence soon reached the extent that the boundaries between the Emperor and the elites blurred, and these values identified with each other (Elliott 2007:183).

The underlying imperial worldview: conceptual and negotiated empire

The power of an underlying imperial world view was the most likely reason why the Roman Empire did not require constant bloody war and conquest, or continuous subjugation in vulgar ways – not that there were not indeed also many instances of such practices among the Roman emperors. In fact, there is good reason to describe the image of Romans as expert military strategists in the modern sense as illusory. The status and security of the Roman emperors and powerful elite depended largely on their *perceived ability* to inflict violence. Contrary to what would have been expected, the Roman emperors and elite were less focused on protecting the boundaries of their realm, and more given to compulsive reaction regarding what they considered to constitute an insult; not bothering to consider possible risks in relation to potential advantages, and often oblivious to expertise[33] (Mattern 1999). This underlying

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[31]   Cf. Cassidy (2001:5–18) who argues that as its basic characteristics, notwithstanding some fear, apprehension and at times subversion, even the military power and political structures and taxation attracted local populations in different ways through their offer of tangible benefits for populations of subjugated territories: public works; peace and order; effective administration (including Roman citizenship benefits as a major prize); to name a few.

[32]   "[W]hatever the costs of Roman conquest and the broader social and political consequences of Roman rule, throughout the empire daily life was certainly safer and more stable" (Hollingshead 1998:5).

[33]   The 1st century tactician Onasander (1.1) listed intelligence, self-control, sobriety, frugality, used to hardship, thoughtful, indifference to money, neither too youthful or too old, and preferable the father of children, eloquence and a good reputation as required characteristics of a good Roman general; no mention is made of military training or experience, knowledge

imperial world-view forms a bridge between the material analysis of empire on the one hand, and understanding empire as concept, as negotiated, on the other.

As all empires in the end tend to be, empire in its first-century version in Roman garb was a negotiated entity, too. The recent study of literary scholar Michael Hardt and political theorist Antonio Negri suggests a fourfold set of characteristics of the modern phenomenon of empire, which resonate well with the ancient forms of empire too. Firstly, empire is a concept and not a nation, and thus without boundaries. The concept of empire is, secondly, not only unencumbered by borders, but also postulates a regime that effectively encompasses all reality (the civilised world) in the total sense of the word. In the third place, empire's rule extends beyond the material and therefore exercises its influence not only on human bodies but on human psychology as well. Empire "creates the very world it inhabits", which includes the material or external as well as the internal world as ultimate biopower. Finally, as a concept empire is always committed to peace, that once again transgresses all conventional boundaries to become "a perpetual and universal peace outside of history"[34] (Hardt & Negri 2000:xv).

As far as these can in fact be construed form the texts, the New Testament's engagements with the Roman Empire fits the portrayal of Empire as a conceptual, negotiated entity. The "[f]ollowers of Jesus employ various strategies – survival, accommodation, protest, dissent, imitation – in negotiating Rome's world" (Carter 2006:26). Two extreme positions, attraction and subversion, serve as markers of the range (ambit) of relating to/negotiating empire.

Negotiating empire: attraction and subversion

A programme for political action against empire is not found in the New Testament, not even in undisguised, anti-imperial rhetoric such as found in Revelation 13 – which is apparently again offset by texts such as Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. Nevertheless, New Testament texts are often read as subversive of empire in a number of ways.

Resistance against empire, amidst ambiguities

Evidence of the resentment towards and hatred of Roman imperialism in its various manifestations is not difficult to find, not even in the inner circles of the

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of geography or military tactics and strategy, knowledge of the enemy or even bravery (Mattern 1999:19–20).

[34] At the heart of imperial peace is violence, ably supported by the military and various other structures, systems and manifestations of violence. Cf. Punt (2011c).

empire.[35] However, the level of antipathy, the extent to which such resentment translated into active revolts among the people subordinated to Roman rule, and the nature of such protest and resistance are more difficult to determine.[36] While some scholars understood their actions to have been part of active and popular protest against the Roman authorities (Horsley 2003a:35), others argue for a more complex socio-political landscape, and caution that the revolt of Judas the Galilean was probably more the result of animosity for being replaced by the Herodian aristocracy, describing their banditry as "the last efforts of a dying social class to regain its former position of wealth and status within Palestinian life" (e.g. Freyne 1988:50–68, esp 58).

In the New Testament, examples of tension and possibly even sub-versive notions toward the Roman Empire can be identified. Two particular incidents[37] from the life of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels, are indicative of both Jesus's subversive approach to the political authorities of the day, "speaking truth to power", as well as the popular, local support he garnered among Galileans and Judeans: the triumphant entry into Jerusalem during the time of the Passover festival, and the "cleansing" of the Temple (Horsley 2008). And when the Roman imperial context is seen as the underlying canvas for the first-century portrait of Paul, new questions emerge.[38] For example, what would the Pauline emphasis on judgement according to works (Rom 2:12–16) have implied in an ideological context where the superiority of Roman people was celebrated? On the other hand, how would the Pauline insistence on faithfulness (pi,stij) "apart from works (e;rga)" have resonated where Roman patronage and the "works" of benefactors determined people's lives and livelihood – as ultimately underwritten by the emperor as benefactor *par excellence* who readily claimed his "works" (cf. Augustus and the *Res Gestae*)? How would Paul's proclamation of one single ancestor for all people of the whole world, Abraham, as father of faith but also "impious" (avsebh,j;

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[35] The famous words of Cicero serve as good example: "It is difficult to put into words, citizens, how much we are hated among foreign nations because of those whom we have sent to govern them throughout these years, men wanton and outrageous" (Cicero, *On the Manilian Law*, 65).

[36] As indicated by the different understandings of Josephus's account of the resistance by Judas the Galilean and Saddok the Pharisee to the Roman fiscal census in Judea in 6 CE.

[37] Horsley's more general notion that Jesus deliberately directed a programme of the renewal of covenantal Israel in and across villages (Horsley 2008) is probably more difficult to show than to claim as the broad canvas for understanding Jesus's work.

[38] It was Paul's urban-focused mission which would have brought him in close contact with the omnipresent imperial tentacles. "Roman cultural hegemony was exercised principally in the cities and their immediate hinterlands. The possession of Roman culture was another symbol of the status of a community and its leading members, many of whom continued to use the vernacular as the language of common discourse. Roman rule accentuated rather than broke down the divisions between city and country, rich and poor, local elites and the urban and local masses" (Garnsey & Saller 1987:203).

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Rom 4:5) have been perceived in a world where the imperial ideology focused so strongly on the legacy of piety as exemplified in the portrayal of Aeneas? (Elliott 2007:186).

Still, even though the subversive potential of Paul's portrayal of Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:23–24; 1 Cor 15:24) and how it relativised all earthly rule is nowadays readily acknowledged, such admission does not imply agreement on Paul's stance and actions (explicit or implied) towards the Roman Empire. For some scholars, Paul's position towards empire meant merely he subsumed all earthly authority and power under God's heavenly power and justice, and the social and political consequences of Christ's universal authority boil down to "a challenge to rulers to understand the basis of their authority and a call to them to seek God's justice for those whom they rule" (Bryan 2005:92).[39] Other scholars posit a contrary position, arguing that even the ostensibly pro-regime Rom 13 should be read along with Rom 12, which renders a different under-standing of Rom 13: undermining and subverting empire through Paul's apocalyptic challenge; arguing for a transformed body politic; undermining the basis of imperial power, namely honour; undermining the violent ethic of empire and calling blessings onto the enemy instead; rejecting the imperial path through conquest; denying Rome any divine authority; contrasting the body politic of Jesus with the Roman Empire defined by wrath and sword; and calling upon the community to love (Keesmaat 2007:141–158; cf. Elliott 2007:187; Wright 2005:78–79).

However, still others argue that "What is strikingly clear is that Jesus's alternative vision did not challenge or seek to radically alter the colonial apparatus", notwithstanding four reported sayings in the Gospels that offer some criticism of empire.[40] However, there is no evidence that Jesus criticised

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[39] This notion, that the political message which runs through the Bible is a consistent line of calling authorities to assume their God-given responsibilities, is promoted so strongly by Bryan in his recent publication, *Render to Caesar* (2005) that all texts are subsumed into this scheme. Bryan is critical of Horsley and Crossan for their respective portrayals of a radical element among early Jesus-followers and Paul in particular, and for questioning the historical veracity of descriptions of Jesus's passion and his trial and execution in particular. On the other hand, however, Bryan fails to take Paul's apocalyptic stance seriously, devaluing it to an otherworldly focus; worryingly, Rom 13:1–7 is according to him the only certain passage with "a Pauline view of the Roman state", and given what Bryan calls Paul's "broadly favorable view" of it, leads him to conclude that "the idea that Paul was interested in seeing an end to Roman rule … is without basis whatever" (Bryan 2005:92–93).

[40] Four implicit critiques are found against imperial, hegemonic formations: dealing with the ambitions of the sons of Zebedee, Jesus's pronouncement on preferring a leadership style different from that of worldly leaders (Mk 10:42–45; Mt 20:20–28; Lk 22:24-27); disparaging remarks about the opulent lifestyle and lavish clothing of the rich, and the implicit exploitation of the poor (Mt 11:8; Lk 7:25; cf. Mt 3:4; 6:19–21; Lk 12:33–34, 16:13); the indirect disparagement of the Herodian kingdom, played off against the kingdom of God, in reaction to the accusation that Jesus was aligned with Beelzebub (Mk 3:23–25; Mt 12:25; Lk 11:17); and the statement about a king counting the cost of going to war (Lk

the expropriation of land by the imperial forces; it seems as if even amidst Jesus's alternative vision, the maintenance of the status quo is presupposed. In the end, "Jesus is seen as a protector of the weak rather than as a protester against the system which produces and perpetuates predatory conditions" (Sugirtharajah 2002:87–91). We can at least conclude that antipathy towards empire is registered in the New Testament texts, even if the course of action (opposition; subversion; conflict; etc) and scope of engagement (intra-community; society-based; structural or personal; cultural, conventional or otherwise; etc) is not as easily determined. But, at the same time, antagonism towards empire was not the only response recorded in or suggested by the New Testament texts.

14:31), probably referring to the war between Herod Antipas and king Aretas of the Nabateans in 32 CE as the culmination of their strained relationship.

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Attraction of/to empire amidst ambiguities

It is indeed vital to understand the criticism against the Roman Empire in line with the biblical and prophetic tradition (e.g. Isa 33:22; cf. Mk 1:15) which acknowledges God as ruler of all, and so avoids "privatized, depoliticized, and generally domesticated Jesuses" (Bryan 2005:9). Whether it is accurate also to argue that the biblical tradition is not intent on destroying or bluntly replacing one set of human power structures with other human structures, but rather "consistently confronting them with *the truth about their origin and purpose*" (Bryan 2005:9) is another question.[41] There is little in the texts (the accompanying theological interpretative framework are another matter altogether!) to support a situation that amounted to a scenario of either simplistically ascribing to imperial figures and actions a theological purpose in (furthering or obstructing) the Kingdom of God, or otherwise of removing them from history altogether.

Although popular consensus has to date not allowed sufficient scrutiny of texts betraying attraction to empire, earlier studies have focused on passages such as Mt 22:17–21; Rom 13:1–7; 1 Pt 2:13–17; or even the whole of Acts as a political apologetic document intent on having the empire and emerging church find common ground (cf. Walton 2002; 2004). In fact, the general tenor of the New Testament texts which neither explicitly call for violent action, not to mention revolt or overthrow of the foreign rulers, nor express unequivocal criticism of the rulers and their rule, can be and at times (recently e.g. Bryan 2005) are mentioned in support of the New Testament authors' accommodation to empire.

While an accommodating stance to imperial designs in the New Testament cannot be denied, tolerance (accommodation) may in the end be too soft a term to describe the *attraction* of empire for people, for how people find themselves attracted to empire – notwithstanding simultaneous distantiation, revulsion, subversion and even active resistance at times. Trying to make sense of texts such as those named above (e.g. Rom 13; Acts), we see that the attraction of empire is not necessarily encapsulated in the goal of enlistment. Attraction can be perceived particularly in how those on the downside of imperial power nevertheless avail themselves of the structures and rhetoric of

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[41] Bryan's strong protest against what he portrays as a one-sided, negative reading of the Roman Empire in current scholarship, and the accusation of hermeneutics warped by overly strong presuppositions (Bryan 2005: esp 119-123), is marred by at least three issues: a one-sided understanding of postcolonial theory; an almost complete absence of a constructive use of ideological criticism; not accounting for the effect of discursive imperialism. Bryan's claim that the NT authors merely wanted the Empire to acknowledge its dependence on God and therefore insisted "that they should do their job" (Bryan 2005:9) does not sit well with the NT's dominant apocalyptic framework presupposing regime change (to use our idiom).

empire. Beyond pragmatism, and in what can be described as mimicry, even those outside the imperial centre can be seen to take over from empire, to achieve similar accoutrements as brought about by imperial affiliation (such as power, status, wealth), even if along different lines and for different purposes.

An approach that apparently opposes empire but which is co-opted through an inadequate handling of the attraction of empire is an alter-empire approach. A rhetoric of alter-empire "proposes a parallel, more powerful imperial structure and presence to that which is being made manifest in the world" (Aymer 2005:141).[42] If dealing with empire becomes the replacement of one with another, even if the other is claimed to be metaphysical, the same imperial rhetoric is bound to surface, complete with its potentially world-devastating consequences. Inevitably, the call for acting against empire through an alter-empire disposes the texts to imperial logic: Revelation portrays an alternative, divine empire equally soaked in blood (cf. Rev 14); Matthew ascribes all authority in heaven and earth to Jesus (Mt 28:18); Jesus is born as the commander in chief of the entire heavenly army (Lk 2:13); the representative of Rome identifies Jesus rather than the emperor as Son of God (Mk 15:39); Jesus disrupts imperial time with a new sense of eternity (Jn 1:1–2); Paul called for an otherworldly citizenship (Phil 3:20) and anticipated the annihilation of his opponents (1 Th 2:16, 5:3); and so forth (cf. Aymer 2005:144–145).[43]

The attraction of empire entails more than subscribing to the propaganda, the ideological image of political stability and peace, and economic security and progress as the benefits of empire, whether through its self-portrayal or the perceptions generated by its direct and implied beneficiaries, or both. Imperial attraction shows up especially in the perceived "rationality", including normality, properness, order and so on, of empire and in the extension, of colonisation. All aspects of life are integrated in a frame-working project, and no effort, whether forceful or persuasive or otherwise, is spared to show that the framework is both rational and beneficial to all. Problems show up when the imperial framework is challenged, the power source weakens or material means waver to such an extent that the framework cannot be kept in place, or when the majority of people no longer can be convinced that it is indeed a proper or rational framework.

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[42] Claims about Paul's "counter-imperial" theology (cf. Wright 2005:69–79) are offset with the notion that Paul was opposed to Caesar's empire not because it was *empire*, but because it was *Caesar's* and because Caesar claimed divine status and honours which only belong to God (Wright 2000:164).

[43] In Paul's long diatribe against the wisdom and power of the powers-that-be in 1 Cor 1–4, his retort is not to let go of such claims and configurations, but rather to re-configure, to re-assemble prerogatives and priorities and privilege – now not only what favours and appeals to him in his situation, but also claiming divine sanction for his newly formulated position. Cf. Punt (2011b).

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Overpowering military force should not be neglected, and oppression and subjection are fair and accurate descriptions of empire. Nevertheless, it bears reminding that empire was made possible through a series of on-going choices and negotiations between subjects and rulers.[44] And amidst the powerful, political manoeuvres and overtures of the imperial mighty ones, the subalterns were also engaged in actions of negotiating their own positions anew (Price 2004:176).[45] So for example, Paul and the communities that Paul addressed found themselves in a hegemonic situation, which was largely characterised by consensual – in the Gramscian sense – domination.[46]

Towards formulating an interpretative (heuristic) grid

To sum up, a number of salient points in the form of remarks and questions may be helpful in theorising empire, showing its possible extended role as heuristic grid. First and foremost, empire remains the best description of what the Romans did in the first-century Mediterranean world through their domination and control over extended territories and diverse groups – bearing in mind that empire is both concept and negotiated.[47]

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[44] "People endure indignities because the coercive power of their rulers gives them no alternative and in some cases because they become habituated to the ideology and rituals that enforce their subordination" (Horsley 2008).

[45] Hegemony in postcolonial thought is *domination by consent* (Gramsci), "the active participation of a dominated group in its own subjugation", and regardless of the fact that the subjugated numerically outweigh those exercising power over them even if the oppressor or army of occupation may have the advantage in terms of instruments of subjugation such as sophisticated weaponry and the like. "In such cases … the indigene's desire for self-determination will have been replaced by a discursively inculcated notion of the greater good, couched in such terms as social stability … and economic and cultural advancement" (cf. Moore 2006a:101). A postcolonial approach offers particular benefits when reading texts in terms of their engagement with and their negotiation of empire. Going beyond an "anti-imperialist" reading, postcolonial approaches show the indeterminacy and instability that can be identified in many texts (cf. Burrus 2007:153). A more nuanced approach to (resistance) literature, amidst the danger of overlooking alter-imperial rhetoric and of reinscribing privilege and power, requires attention for the power and language and the imagery New Testament texts use, as well as the socio-political structures and power relations it draws upon (cf. Schüssler Fiorenza 2007:4–5). In picking up on surface-level and underlying tensions in texts, postcolonial biblical criticism is useful *and* effective in studying Empire not only as material setting but also as heuristic grid for biblical interpretation (cf. Punt 2010a). In another, differently focused discussion, the value of postcolonial work in theorising empire is considered in more detail (cf. Punt 2011a).

[46] The evidence of uprisings and revolts in the areas where Paul claimed to have been working as apostle, is scarce and probably an instance where the exception (insurrection) proved the rule (negotiated domination).

[47] Dangerous for different reasons, a working definition may nevertheless be attempted: Empire is a complex, intricate constellation or web of interrelations between the powerful and the marginalised, characterised by uneven power relations but constantly negotiated and

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A second, uncomfortable, realisation is that resistance to empire and even freedom from imperial power, in whichever way and to whatever extent, is no guarantee that the resisters or the emancipated will not re-inscribe empire (cf. also Martin & Barnes 2003:7). "The New Testament is far more imperial, alter-imperial yes, but imperial nevertheless, than some of us with less imperial agendas care to admit" (Aymer 2005:146). An important question flows from the above. And therefore, thirdly, amidst the need to investigate religion and empire,[48] and while acknowledging their confluence or at least intersections in the first century, how can one conceptualise the relationship between theological, religious or (even) faith convictions and the dynamics of "political" power? Particularly when such power concerns rest on a modern-day and domesticated underlying imperial ideology[49] – and, then to do so beyond the apparent ease with which politics and religion feed off each other?

Particular to our context of investigating early Christianity (and much of this would pertain to Second Temple Judaism as well), in the fourth place, to what extent can religious traditions, fomented and formed in an imperial context and in interaction with empire, tolerate other notions of power or democratic configurations thereof? "When a tradition is originally embodied in empire with sweeping political power, does it more readily define itself as universal?" (cf. Martin and Barnes 2003:9). The allure of empire, if not of colonisation, can be and often is variously described. Therefore, fifthly, most obviously among the beneficiaries of empire and hegemony, the insistence on, experience of and eventually praise for imperial power is commonly closely connected to its derivatives and other advantages of being in close proximity to power, its exercise and influence.[50] But imperialists are generally not content

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aimed at the submission of those on the periphery, who are often in distant settings, by taking over and controlling land and resources.

[48] "[G]overnment and religion both functioned, theoretically, to secure the same ends of making life prosperous, meaningful, and happy. The gods brought peace and prosperity and made the state great. In turn, the state sponsored and encouraged the worship of gods" (Ehrman 2008:27). Richard Horsley has argued that there are three patterns which are useful for describing the relationship between empire and religion: imperial elites can simply construct the subject peoples' religion; subjected people can in reaction and even in resistance to imperial rule, revive their traditional ways of life; or, religious practices can be develop that in fact constitute imperial power relations (Horsley 2003b:13-44). Cf. Roth (2003d:121-128); Horsley (2003a:129-133).

[49] Contemporary underlying imperial theology is probably more readily formatted by conventionalised "root metaphors", as concepts and patterns of speech taken for granted and generally not consciously considered or deliberated (Elliott 2005:175, referring to Lakoff); such metaphors do not only frame but actually constitute and format certain social patterns.

[50] In other words, "soft power", the ability of the powerful to make others want the same as that which empire and its forces want (cf. Walker 2002:48, taking the phrase from Joseph S Nye of Harvard University).

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only with looking after their own, and deliberately set about persuading others too.[51]

In the sixth place, considerations of empire today take place within a context characterised by both material and discursive imperialism, often lasting vestiges of earlier times, even if today of different configuration(s). "What remains after empires fade is neither their weapons nor their wealth. Rather, they leave behind the ideas and the arts and the sciences that seem to flourish best amid the great stability of empires" (Walker 2002:49). Some scholars adopt a (typically) fatalist-pragmatist response, not only in ascribing imperial power, for example to the foreign policy of the USA or multinational capitalist bodies,[52] but also in suggesting that the human world is unthinkable without empire of some sort: the inevitability of empire, reducing the choice to our *preferred* form of imperialism (Roth 2003:128).

Finally, it can also be important for our investigations to move beyond socio-historical descriptive investigations of empire and comparative ventures, to spend more time also on the investigation of the perspective from the other side: how groups and communities struggled to deal with the pull and push of assimilation, and the resultant dangers; the efforts to maintain a certain identity and/or tradition in the face of imperial imposition; and to understand the efforts to move towards the rewriting of a group's identity completely, in contradistinction to imperial influence and impact (cf. Martin & Barnes 2003:11). Whether such negotiations with imperial ideology and imposition would ever have been so monolithic, so devoid of intersecting and (even, mutually) informing criss-crossing lines between empire and subjects, or always oblivious to the imperial rubbing-off amidst resistance against empire, is certainly matter for investigation.

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[51] Intent on convincing also distracters about the positive value of Empire, inculcation of ideology is conspicuously underlined by the positive reaction of crowds towards military parade-style events, with troops and images of firepower and destruction embodied in military hardware and technology – ironically, the very instruments to secure the imperial concerns yet directly threatening the lives of imperial opposition. Second example: Another image often encountered in our postmodern yet neo-capitalist world is the wide-eyed, childlike appreciation in various parts of the world for that institution helping to drain financial resources, the maintenance of a feudal era legacy; in a word, royalty.

[52] Part of the problem with addressing modern day empire is the diverse and obscure nature of it, abiding in the network of structures, systems and bodies that constitute what is often called global capitalism; only secondarily is global capitalism policed and protected by government and military force such as those of the USA (cf. Horsley 2003a:131). In a number of other ways the comparison between the megalomaniac, global power-absorbing and -dispensing USA with Rome of old as empires of similar berth and verve is not proper. Some similarities exist e g re military power, commercial dominance and cultural influence, but the comparison gets bogged down in the absence of an emperor (the USA president, "elected for a specific term", would have amounted to "a magistrate who administers laws that he is not empowered to enact"); the extent of its rule; and its preference for free allies rather than client states (cf. Walker 2002:36–49).

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Conclusion

Theorising empire in relation to biblical texts requires more than historical descriptions of material or ideological resources. On the one hand, the first-century Roman Empire was neither monolithic nor was it merely imposed in singular or simplistic fashion on passive and disinterested potential subjects – of course, also without suggesting that the profile of imperial subject was an uncomplicated one. However, given the interaction between imperial forces and indigenous foreigners, empire was principally the distillation of sustained interaction between rulers and subjects. On the other hand, theorising empire compels scepticism for depictions of imperial benevolence on behalf of the subjugated.[53] Altruistic claims by empires are challenged by realisations about the impact and legacy of the abolition of slavery, the end of the era of colonialism, and women's suffrage, as much as by that of world wars and subsequent armed conflicts, as well as the somewhat more recent replacement of two belligerent imperial powers of the Cold War era by one even more violence-oriented super-power in a period of neo-colonialism.

       The challenge is not to make the study of empire into yet another new scientific research field or paradigm of historical study but still remaining largely within existing hegemonic academic research paradigms, as if such work can be done aloof from socio-political location and entanglements. Texts and traditions that articulate empire require our attention, but so too do the submerged and marginalised voices and discourses, within and related to the texts (cf. Schüssler Fiorenza 2005:138–139).[54] And such studies, like all others, relate willingly or unwillingly, consciously or otherwise to a global, geopolitical context, characterised on the one hand by jostling imperial powers, and on the other hand, by the impact of such imperialist globalisation (ably assisted by global capitalism and military hegemony) and its influence upon other, smaller and contained terrains and communities.

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[53]   Cf. e.g. the references quoted in Alexander (1991:11–12) claiming both the benevolence and the benefits of empire for its subjects, as well as the protest and denial of advantage wrought by empire (including a 2nd century CE rabbinic dialogue, with Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai exclaiming, "Everything they [the Romans] have made they have made only for themselves: market-places, for whores; baths, to wallow in; bridges, to levy tolls" (in *Šab.* 33b).

[54]   The widespread, insidious presence of empire in New Testament texts give rise to questions of culture, ideology and power, as suggested by Segovia (1998:57–58): "How do the margins look at the 'world' – a world dominated by the reality of empire – and fashion life in such a world? How does the center regard and treat the margins in light of its own view of the 'world' and life in that world? What images and representations of the other-world arise from either side? How is history conceived and constructed by both sides? How is the 'other' regarded and represented? What conceptions of oppression and justice are to be found?"

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