

Empire Criticism of the New Testament

Edited by
CHRISTOPH HEILIG

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament
550*

Mohr Siebeck

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550



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New Approaches

Edited by
Christoph Heilig

Mohr Siebeck

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Empire Criticism

From the Golden Age of Caesar to the Age of Artificial Intelligence

What did the first Christians think about the Roman Empire? Did they accept its claim to power, differentiating perhaps between a political sphere in which Caesar ruled and a spiritual sphere in which loyalty was due to Christ? Or were they critical of Rome's aspirations, perceiving a conflict between the gospel that they had received on the one hand and Roman ideology that they were confronted with on a daily basis?

It is sometimes suggested that older New Testament scholarship – dominated by, among other things, a Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms – uncritically and without exception or qualification accepted the former assumption. That is just as unfair as insinuations that proponents of the second opinion are simply motivated by leftist ideologies and not interested in the historical realities.

Still, it remains true that the 1990s saw increased interest in how the earliest Christians interacted with Roman rule in their day and a greater openness to finding criticism of imperial ideology in their writings. Both the way in which these scholars have emphasized the originality of their approach and the critique with which they have been met by those who disagree with them justify treating them as a distinct movement within New Testament scholarship.

A Paradigm in Transition

A history of research on this paradigm remains to be written. What proponents of this approach themselves offer is usually not much more than an account of the individual genealogy of influence – explaining merely the respective idiosyncrasies of their own approaches.¹ An account of how these explicit references to previous research explain certain instances of narrowed perspectives and an overview of what holds them together remains a lacuna that I hope will be closed soon (by someone else). In this introduction, I want to focus on the future of said paradigm – and how I hope the present volume will positively shape its devel-

¹ This is also true for me. See Christoph Heilig, *Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul*, WUNT II 392 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015; 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 21–24, and Christoph Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire: Paul's Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome*, with a foreword by John M. G. Barclay (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), chapter 1.

opment. I will refrain from summarizing the individual contributions in this book, as I believe their titles are already self-explanatory. Rather, I want to explain my own personal motivation for launching this project (which may or may not be shared by the other authors!) and what kind of impact I hope it will have.

So, what about the future of the quest for an early Christianity that was critical of the Roman Empire? Is it just a passing fad? Some speculated at the turn of the millennium that the entire paradigm would lose steam after the end of the Bush administration.² This does indeed seem to have been the case. However, it must be emphasized that the relative scarcity of new analyses pushing the paradigm forward has set in not *because* of a lack of modern authoritarianism that left-leaning scholars might be opposed to but *despite* imperial aspirations of modern superpowers arguably being even more on our minds in recent years than ever! To me, this suggests that the entire line of inquiry has always been more than just a research program built on a political agenda. More importantly, I think it implies that the decline in interest – which I personally think is real and which I don't want to deny – needs to be explained by other factors.

The Challenge of Methodological Rigor

In my view, the decisive factor in this development is best summarized by the title of a review article that was published just one week before I sat down to write this introduction and that, focusing on Paul, emphasizes the “methodological rigour” required in studies of how the apostle and his readers “related to imperial power.”³

To be sure, said methodological rigor can certainly be a deterrent to early-career researchers entering the field – in a dual sense. To begin with, having the impression that one first has to battle through a mountain of theoretical secondary literature, full of contradictory views, before one can even begin to analyze the primary texts, isn't particularly attractive. This does not mean, however, that

² I see this tendency of associating anti-imperial readings of the New Testament with resistance toward specific manifestations of US politics in, for example, Denny Burk, “Is Paul's Gospel Counterimperial? Evaluating the Prospects of the ‘Fresh Perspective’ for Evangelical Theology,” *JETS* 51 (2008): 309–37, and Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). By contrast, see Joel R. White, “Anti-Imperial Subtexts in Paul: An Attempt at Building a Firmer Foundation,” *Bib* 90 (2009): 305. He entertains this framing but correctly thinks the paradigm would endure. However, the reason he adduces for this optimism is that in his view the paradigm works with a very wide notion of empire. I, by contrast, am of the opinion that we don't need such abstract notions of empire for us in the present to be interested in “imperialism” – rather, we are confronted at the moment with pretty concrete contours of actual empires, which makes the issue pressing to us, in its highly specific form!

³ Jonathon Lookadoo, “Methodological Rigour in Studies of How Paul and His Readers Related to Imperial Power,” *Review in Religion & Theology* 32 (2025): 86–92.

this methodological discourse should simply be bypassed. Such a short-term fix also leads to a stalemate quickly within the field, namely once different opinions on the meaning of the texts have been articulated and there is no common framework to evaluate such proposals.⁴ Then, junior researchers are faced with the equally off-putting impression that there is just a dichotomy of positions to deal with, no real conversation to enter.

To be sure, simple matters might benefit from simple approaches; methodological discussions for their own sake are just as counterproductive. But I am of the opinion that the last three decades have clearly shown that the question of how the first Christians related to the Roman Empire is *not* such a simple issue. The truth is that from the perspective of the earliest followers of Christ, the Roman Empire did not (as some overly enthusiastic proponents of empire criticism might have suggested) appear as a clearly demarcated external force, a foe with clear contours that early Christians opposed persistently and above all else. Rather, it was a power structure that permeated every aspect of their lives – including their own self-identification. Identifying critiques of this empire is, therefore, necessarily a complicated matter, a constantly negotiated compromise at the very heart of each individual and community, an issue that, hence, needs to be approached with nuance, surgical precision – and, thus, methodological sophistication.

For this very same reason, however, because the Romanness of early Christianity is deeply embedded in its identity, the question of how early Christians reacted to aspects of Roman ideology is of vital importance in my opinion and cannot simply be pushed aside because of the tedious preparatory work that it requires. When we understand how the early Christians navigated their existence in the Roman Empire, we understand something about the very essence of these individuals and communities – and if we don't, we thus miss something important.

The Present Volume: Aims and Approach

This double conviction – of both the importance and the complexity of the issue – is the main impetus behind the present volume. It goes back to many conversations with scholars working on these questions, particularly as part of our unofficial “Early Christianity and Empire” group that regularly meets and discusses these matters during the annual SBL meetings. What I have personally noticed in these debates is that while the participants disagree, often widely, with respect to the extent to which New Testament writers did in fact criticize the

⁴ This has happened, in my view, to the narrative approach to Paul. See Christoph Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller: A Narratological Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024).

Roman Empire, we all agree that there is a lot of material that has not yet been properly analyzed – that deserves a fair assessment and that, for that purpose, requires a broad array of up-to-date methodological tools. It has thus been my wish for the last couple of years to assemble a group of experts who could explain what kinds of insights their specific approach to these ancient texts might yield regarding the critical interaction of early Christians with their Roman context.

New Perspectives

This volume is the result of this desire. All authors are experts on the specific approach that they introduce and each of these approaches brings a fresh impetus to the current debate. They shed light on different facets of early Christian-Roman interaction, sometimes illuminating the same areas, but from a different angle, sometimes emphasizing the need to pay attention to parameters that might be missed from other vantage points.

It should go without saying that the multiperspectival nature of our approach implies from the outset that the selection of approaches investigated here cannot be exhaustive.⁵ Each of them is, however, a rather obvious candidate for one of several considerations that might be heuristically helpful to have in mind when examining potential critiques of Rome in early Christian texts.⁶

I intentionally designate these approaches “new” in the subtitle of this volume because I am of the conviction that none of them has received sufficient attention yet in the debate about whether and to what extent New Testament writers did in fact criticize the Roman Empire.⁷ While some approaches have become more common practice in New Testament studies in general (such as the incorporation of papyrological evidence, to pick just one example), the actual evidential weight

⁵ On the contrary, re-reading the volume as a whole in order to prepare the indices I have already come to see new areas that would deserve attention. To give just one example, I noticed there is a constant interplay of emphases on rational motives and emotionally driven decisions. I am glad to see – already having hinted myself at the possibility that Paul might have made some critical, rather unwise remarks, in the heat of the moment (Heilig, *Apostle*, 32–39 and 98–100) – that with contributions such as Nils Neumann’s focus on historical psychology, this latter dimension is coming into view more directly. At the same time, it seems to me now that in the future we might need more precise tools to evaluate the rational component of early Christian interaction with the Roman sphere. Game theory is an obvious and in New Testament studies in general largely neglected option. Joel R. White, “Philemon, Game Theory, and the Reconfiguration of Household Relationships,” *EuroJTh* 26 (2017): 32–42, is the exception.

⁶ I intentionally speak of early Christian texts in general here. This volume focuses explicitly on canonical writings because this is the common denominator of New Testament (and Early Christian) studies on an international level, especially if one takes on a pedagogical perspective (see below). Of course, widening a perspective beyond canonical material will be a crucial next step.

⁷ Some of these emphases correspond with what I identified as, back then, current blind spots in empire criticism in Heilig, *Apostle*, chapter 5. Many have not been on my radar until I got convinced of their potential by others.

that the evidence in question has been allowed so far in empire criticism remains marginal. Admittedly, some categories – such as James C. Scott’s “hidden transcript” – have, in fact, been invoked for decades in debates about the New Testament and empire – but still we are far from even having established a kind of methodological consensus that could simply be adopted, for example by doctoral students who focus on specific texts and who might want to simply apply an existing framework. The very fact that we are still debating the most fundamental questions of how these categories might apply to our texts demonstrates that we need more methodological discussion on these matters, not less.

The idea behind this volume is that each chapter opens up a perspective on the text that seems promising with respect to illuminating individual aspects of Christian-Roman interaction. I am very excited about the result in that I believe that some new and fundamental insights have been achieved in these contributions. I thus hope that the volume will be an eye-opener to many, demonstrating the riches that can still be discovered by an empire-critical analysis of early Christian texts.

And I want to emphasize that this focus on actual *texts* is just as important for this volume as the plea for methodological rigor. Of course, the proof is in the pudding! By no means is this volume intended to offer “a new method,” as if the authors sat together to devise a singular approach to uncovering critiques of the Roman Empire. It is also not, as one might assume perhaps, simply an overview of a variety of methods that are introduced for their own sake, a kind of template that may or may not have heuristic potential but that is introduced simply to do justice to the fact that it is a theoretical approach that exists out there, perhaps in a neighboring discipline. Rather, each and every contribution must be judged by the extent to which it opens up new ground, allows for new insights, and connects previously disconnected elements in the text. Personally, I am of the opinion that they all greatly enhance our understanding of early Christianity in its Roman context and I am particularly grateful to many of the contributors trying to connect their approach to those of others, noting potential synergies and tensions so that every reader can decide for themselves which aspect they want to incorporate in their own reconstruction of Christian-Roman relations during the time of the composition of the New Testament.

Deepening the Conversation

Before I come to the actual layout of the book, I need to demarcate it from another type of edited volume that has become quite popular with respect to the topic of Empire. The fundamental volumes on Empire in the 1990s were followed by a multitude of projects in the 2000s and 2010s that brought together different authors to discuss how specific New Testament texts relate to Roman ideology. As I have explained in much more detail elsewhere, I find that genre

to be quite problematic.⁸ My opinion is that it has cultivated something like a pseudo-discourse. Often, experts on specific New Testament writings are asked to comment on the dimension of the Roman Empire, even though – or even because – they have not yet dealt extensively with this aspect in their writing before. This certainly is attractive in that it could provide a kind of outsider perspective on what might just be a fad. However, it also means that fundamental methodological considerations are regularly missed and that the same kinds of mistakes are repeated over and over again. This can also happen when the seemingly opposite approach is taken and one and the same “empire expert” is asked time and again to cover a certain canonical writing. A certain academic monoculture develops that has the same end result. For in both cases, we can witness a narrowing of perspective that excludes many potentially valid considerations. And as soon as one such voice has spoken on the issue, it becomes the new point of departure for the next contribution on the topic – often in a volume of the same kind. After just a couple of rounds, this creates the illusion of something like a consensus or at least a clearly demarcated area of debate. And doctoral students who then approach a topic related to Empire and the New Testament will take this extremely thin discourse as the point of departure for their own analysis, thus further perpetuating the narrowing of perspective. I think we are simply not yet in the position to produce overviews of that kind that could summarize substantial debates and synthesize areas of consensus. I am convinced that, ironically, by focusing first on methodological basics, this volume brings many new texts into view that have not yet featured in the debate, thus actually broadening the range of texts typically considered.

This volume also differs in another important way from the kinds of books that I have in mind. The goal behind some of those, including the classics from the 1990s, was to establish a certain position on the matter – either in terms of making a case for anti-imperial Christians or with the purpose in mind of exposing the entire paradigm as a leftist enterprise. Importantly, trying from the outset to establish some “middle ground” isn’t neutral either!⁹ By contrast, one of the benefits of approaching the question of anti-imperialism in the New Testament from a limited, specialized perspective is that it provides a high-resolution picture that will inevitably come with nuance. All authors in this volume, even those who have a lot of critical things to say about publications classically associated with anti-imperial readings, will admit that there is something there in these texts that under certain conditions could constitute some kind of critique of Rome and that needs to be taken seriously and analyzed properly. And all those

⁸ Christoph Heilig, “Das Neue Testament im Schatten des Imperiums,” *VF* 68 (2023): 14–30.

⁹ Cf. already Heilig, *Hidden Criticism*, 23, on Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, eds., *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013).

of us who find a lot of critique of Rome are, in turn, faced with the recognition that the Roman realm penetrates early Christian discourse in many forms and that it would be reductionistic to think about this interaction merely in terms of opposition or resistance.

The volume is thus intentionally not called “Empire Criticism *in* the New Testament” (even though this was the working title in the beginning), but “Empire Criticism *of* the New Testament,” to do justice to the fact that Christian-Roman interactions are as complex as their analysis is important. The task is to identify the many ways in which the Roman Empire had an impact on text production in early Christianity, with critique of Rome ending up in the text (or subtext) being one of several possible manifestations.

Moreover, looking so much for critique, many of us do identify critical remarks in New Testament texts – but more than once we are forced to recognize that it is not Rome – or not just Rome, or not primarily Rome – that constitutes the opponent in question. Similarly, we sometimes notice that there is in fact a critique of Rome – but that the method in question only identifies it in *other* texts that we look at for comparison, while failing to identify the same phenomena in the New Testament corpus (or at least yielding less likely results there). What our essays thus offer is both a network (Christian critique of Rome in relation to Christian critiques of *other* entities and *non-Christian* critiques of Rome) and a spectrum of plausibility for specific texts. The goal is to enable readers to apply this framework themselves to the same or similar texts – and depending on their individual presuppositions they might come to different conclusions, might land on a different spot on the spectrum of how likely the identification of a critique of Rome is for any given New Testament passage.¹⁰

Structure and Organization

The way that this volume is designed is that it begins with approaches that are focused on language per se or at least fundamental categories of linguistic expression: stories, speech acts, semiotics, and metaphors. From there, we slowly move to more historically situated categories, from social identity to historical psychology, from an attempt to uncover “hidden transcripts” in early Christian communities to emic categories stemming from ancient rhetoric. Finally, we take into view four aspects of material culture: papyri, inscriptions, coinage, and iconography.

¹⁰ I have written in detail elsewhere about how different priors influence exegetical decisions. For a recent and accessible treatment, see my discussion in Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller*, 317–34 (on the example of alleged “narrative substructures”). The discussion in Theresa Heilig and Christoph Heilig, “Historical Methodology,” in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul: A Critical Examination of the Pauline Theology of N. T. Wright*, ed. Christoph Heilig, J. Thomas Hewitt, and Michael F. Bird, WUNT II/413 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016; 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 115–50, remains foundational.

Each author explains why in their view the respective approach has something new and relevant to offer to debates about the Roman Empire in New Testament texts. Note that even though their contributions often break new ground, they also aim to introduce their approach and the relevant terminology and literature. This makes the volume uniquely suitable as a textbook for advanced students, who will become familiar with important exegetical methods and at the same time will learn about one of the most pressing issues in the field. I am very happy that it was possible to make this book available in open access, thus greatly enhancing its accessibility to students.¹¹

I want to add a comment here on something the classicist Ulrike Roth has written in a review of one of my books on Paul and Empire.¹² There is little critique of my specific contribution in this review (to which I respond below, in my own chapter, on p. 33), but quite a blistering assessment of empire criticism and New Testament studies in general from the perspective of an informed outsider (she is an ancient historian who has also studied theology). As such, I think it gives us valuable feedback from a perspective that we as New Testament scholars should take very seriously. However, I was struck by one comment in particular, namely when she rejects my “call for more specialised commentaries or handbooks to provide the missing expertise.”¹³ (I was talking about works that make specialized approaches such as papyrology more accessible to the average New Testament scholar.) The rationale of her position is: “such research is widely published and accessible – requiring merely a preparedness to approach the ancient world holistically, rather than within a single scholarly niche.”¹⁴ While it might be true that it would be great if New Testament scholars did not need special introductions on how to apply papyrology, epigraphy, or numismatics – to name just a few areas – to their texts, the reality is simply that only very few scholars in our field have acquired the expertise to deal with these materials on a high level, and I therefore continue to be grateful to the efforts of these scholars to help those of us who have not developed the same skills to at least use these tools responsibly. And I do think that given how most New Testament scholars acquire their specific set of skills (this has to do with many factors, such as the incorporation of New Testament studies in wider theological programs – which, by the way, might come with additional competencies in other areas, easily over-

¹¹ The open access version of this book was made possible by a generous contribution of the LMU Open Access Fund. My own chapter was paid for by the “Elite Network of Bavaria” as part of the funding for my research group “Focalization in Early Christian Stories.” I am also thankful to my student assistant, Masahiro Kubota, for preparing the indices of authors and ancient sources for this volume.

¹² Ulrike Roth, review of *The Apostle and the Empire: Paul’s Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome*, by Christoph Heilig, *JRS* 113 (2023): 214–16.

¹³ Roth, review of *The Apostle and the Empire*, 215.

¹⁴ Roth, review of *The Apostle and the Empire*, 215.

looked by philologists and historians; the institutional limitations of short PhD programs; etc.), there is no reason to suspect that this might change simply by telling early-career scholars that they should, in fact, know all of that anyway.

Future Horizons: Researching and Teaching Empire in the Age of AI

I make this point so emphatically because I believe that the pressures created by the advances in generative artificial intelligence will, in all likelihood, make it even *more* difficult to establish the kind of exhaustive philological education for biblical scholars that Roth seems to deem the norm. After all, it is becoming increasingly controversial whether teaching philological methods is of any worth at all!¹⁵ And I do believe that we need in fact to be realistic with respect to what kinds of tasks will become automatable in the very near future,¹⁶ which leads me to the opinion that this revolution will indeed fundamentally alter what it means to be a New Testament scholar.¹⁷

However, that being said, I also think that once we accept that studying these ancient texts is not just about the scholarly output that we may produce but also about the acquisition of cultural practices and the holistic formation of individuals, I believe that contributions like the present volume, which combine cutting-edge research with a specifically pedagogical outlook, will become more and more important. For they will help students to become critical thinkers – not for the sake of any specific text they might have to produce in individual jobs (such as a sermon as a pastor, or a commentary as a biblical scholar), but for the sake of developing their personalities.

This will require time, lots of time. But in an age when we become increasingly forced to relinquish established cultural practices that have shaped humanity for millennia, such as reading and writing, I believe a desire will develop to personally acquire these skills, regardless of whether a computer can also carry out the corresponding tasks. And perhaps we can then even establish an educational framework in which the breadth and depth of education of biblical scholars matches the, no doubt desirable, utopia that Roth thinks should be reality. In the meantime, we have to acknowledge that current curricula do not provide the necessary space. It is no wonder that students prefer to let ChatGPT read and

¹⁵ I am particularly occupied with these developments due to my role as a PI in the International Doctorate Program Philology at the University of Munich.

¹⁶ See Christoph Heilig, “Between Ancient Texts and Large Language Models: The Future of Pedagogy in Biblical Exegesis,” *VvAa – Forum Exegese und Hochschuldidaktik* (in press).

¹⁷ I feel that my long-standing aversion to the genre of the biblical commentary (cf., e.g., Heilig, *Apostle*, chapter 6, for a more recent critical analysis) is being clearly vindicated by these current trends.

write under these conditions. But I am optimistic that higher education in the humanities will at some point create the necessary context that will allow for slow reading, critical discussion, and honing writing skills – if only because otherwise no one will enroll anymore.

It is this outlook that makes the present project so important to me. It is an attempt to create something like a model for what scholarship might look like in the future, a textbook that can still motivate students because it (a) deals with a fascinating subject that can excite them to begin with and (b) goes beyond what a large language model could tell them – and not just as of now, but generally, namely by inviting them to enter an actual dialogue with human experts, to participate in a conversation that they can continue through their own thinking and writing, knowing that in doing so they will be embedded in a network of interpersonal communication, not just reworking impersonal text.

Christoph Heilig, Ulm, August 2025

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Narratology

Analyzing Subversive Counternarratives

Christoph Heilig

1 Narrative in Empire Criticism

In my opinion, the consideration of narrative dynamics deserves a central place in empire criticism.¹ This is true for several reasons, the first of which is that the quest for traces of early Christian negotiation of Roman imperial ideology has been marked from the beginning by an – at least implicit – understanding of the fact that many of the texts (or text parts) in question are narrative and that this characteristic is indeed vital for their supposed imperial-critical function.

This becomes obvious, for example, in the contribution of N. T. Wright, who in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* first sketches Paul's Roman background in terms of a salvific history² and then contrasts Paul's narrative worldview with this sketch,³ arguing not only for tensions between these different stories of the world but also maintaining that Paul would have been aware of this narrative incompatibility: "As Paul told and retold the long story of the creator God and his chosen people, reaching its shocking climax in the crucified Messiah, he can hardly have been unaware ..., of the powerful alternative narrative that Rome was offering to the world."⁴ Accordingly, it is not surprising that his analysis of passages such as Phil 2:6–11 then takes on a decidedly narrative tone – according to Wright, there the "story of Jesus" is told in a way "so that it echoes and upstages the story of Caesar."⁵

In *Hidden Criticism?* (finalized just when Wright's *magnum opus* appeared in print), I argued that this *narrative* character of the alleged implicit criticism of Rome in Paul's letters held the potential to add plausibility to the claim that we can identify an anti-imperial sentiment "between the lines" of the text. While I

¹ This article is part of my wider research on early Christian narratives, funded by the Elite Network of Bavaria. I am grateful for Dr. Ellen Howard, who is part of this research team, for providing feedback on this article.

² N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 4 (London: SPCK, 2013), 279–347. Note, for example, the section on "The Climax of the Narrative" (pp. 298–321).

³ Wright, *Faithfulness*, 1271–1319.

⁴ Wright, *Faithfulness*, 1282.

⁵ Wright, *Faithfulness*, 1249.

was skeptical that Paul would have hidden his critical remarks in the subtext *in order* to avoid persecution,⁶ I was wondering why we would view the subtext as a kind of second-rate medium in the first place, a communicative choice that would require an elaborate justification. By contrast, it seemed to me that less direct attacks at the Roman realm might ultimately have been rhetorically more effective for Paul than outright, in-your-face claims – especially if we assume that his comments were also meant to *persuade* his audience, away from placing trust in the Emperor as a source of salvation, away from societal structures outside the church that Paul might have seen standing in conflict with the gospel.⁷

Others have agreed with this suggestion to at least some extent. For example, Michael F. Bird concludes in *An Anomalous Jew* that “[a]nyone vaguely familiar with the Roman imperium could see Paul articulating the vision of an alternative empire. It is not simply the parallel terminology that Paul uses like κύριος or εὐαγγέλιον, but the apocalyptic and messianic narrative that such language is couched in that makes it tacitly counterimperial.”⁸ And others, such as Laura J. Hunt with respect to the Gospel of John and Justin Winzenburg with respect to Ephesians, have incorporated a focus on this narrative dimension as at least a central element alongside other considerations.⁹

2 A Narratological Perspective

Generally, however, I admit that so far the explication of what it might mean for empire criticism to pay more attention to narrative details has remained rather limited. In part, this reluctance to explicitly focus on the aspect of narrativity in empire criticism can be explained by the fact that the debate continues to focus on the Apostle Paul.¹⁰ And if we assume that “Paul is simply not a storyteller” and that he “in his extant writings never actually tells a story” (with the exception

⁶ Though I am no longer that bullish on that point. Cf. now Christoph Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire: Paul’s Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome*, with a foreword by John M. G. Barclay (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022).

⁷ Christoph Heilig, *Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul*, WUNT 392 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015; 2nd ed., Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 136–38.

⁸ Michael F. Bird, *An Anomalous Jew: Paul among Jews, Greeks, and Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 254.

⁹ Laura J. Hunt, *Jesus Caesar: A Roman Reading of the Johannine Trial Narrative*, WUNT II/506 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019) and Justin Winzenburg, *Ephesians and Empire: An Evaluation of the Epistle’s Subversion of Roman Imperial Ideology*, WUNT II/573 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

¹⁰ Cf., e.g., Laura Robinson, “Hidden Transcripts? The Supposedly Self-Censoring Paul and Rome as Surveillance State in Modern Pauline Scholarship,” *NTS* 67 (2021): 55–72, for an update on the argument made by John M. G. Barclay, “Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul,” in *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, ed. John M. G. Barclay, WUNT 275 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 363–87.

of Gal 1–2),¹¹ why then should one burden an already controversial position by invoking categories that might cause it to appear even more obscure?

Moreover, while “narrative criticism” has, in fact, become commonplace in NT studies with respect to the Gospels, it remains also true that the discourse as a whole still lags behind several decades with respect to where narratologists currently are.¹² Lack of methodological clarity in analyzing stories in general naturally carries over into an insecurity with respect to how to apply these tools to narratives that might be anti-imperial.

However, since it can be demonstrated that Paul *is* in fact a talented storyteller who makes use of narratives in many different ways,¹³ and since it can likewise be shown that exegetical discussions *do*, in fact, benefit immensely from taking into account current narratological research,¹⁴ I think it is prudent to come back to the question of whether understanding early Christian comments in their Roman context *as* narratives is heuristically beneficial for empire criticism.

2.1 Counternarratives

This conviction that narratology holds a lot of promise for biblical exegesis in general forms the backbone of my second argument why empire criticism should focus on narrative concerns. It can be strengthened, however, even further, if we consider specific narratological categories. The most obvious one is the one of “counternarratives.” There is currently a rich and growing discourse on such narratives, stories that are told to resist or challenge dominant social narratives and power structures, often revealing marginalized perspectives and alternative interpretations of social reality.¹⁵

¹¹ Francis C. Watson, “Is There a Story in These Texts?” in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 232 and 239.

¹² Moisés Mayordomo, “Exegese zwischen Geschichte, Text und Rezeption: Literaturwissenschaftliche Zugänge zum Neuen Testament,” *VF* 55 (2010): 19–37. See also Sönke Finckern, *Narratologie und biblische Exegese: Eine integrative Methode der Erzählanalyse und ihr Ertrag am Beispiel von Matthäus 28*, WUNT II/285 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), and Jan Rügemeier, *Poetik der markinischen Christologie: Eine kognitiv-narratologische Exegese*, WUNT II/458 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017). Even though I don’t agree with their framework of cognitive narratology, they have to be credited with elevating the discourse to a new level.

¹³ Christoph Heilig, *Paulus als Erzähler? Eine narratologische Perspektive auf die Paulus-briefe*, BZNW 237 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), and Christoph Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller: A Narratological Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024).

¹⁴ Christoph Heilig, *Just a Matter of Perspective? Focalization in Early Christian Stories* (Habilitationsschrift, University of Basel, 2024; planned publication: WUNT I, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2026).

¹⁵ For a recent definition, see Klarissa Lueg, Ann Starbæk Bager, and Marianne Wolff Lundholt, “Introduction: What Counter-Narratives Are: Dimensions and Levels of a Theory of Middle Range,” in *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*, ed. Klarissa Lueg and Marianne Wolff Lundholt (London: Routledge, 2021), 4.

Obviously, approaching early Christian reactions to Roman ideology through the lens of counternarratives holds promise considering the above-mentioned fact that these reactions seem to be characterized, at least in part, by their narrativity. There are, however, several more specific advantages to such an approach that I want to mention shortly.

As Klarissa Lueg, Ann Starbæk Bager, and Marianne Wolff Lundholt argue, counternarratives can be understood as a “theory of middle range”¹⁶ – positioned between grand theoretical assumptions about narrative as a fundamental mode of human sense-making and concrete empirical analysis. This theoretical status allows counternarratives to function as a bridging concept that connects larger social and political dynamics on the one hand with specific textual manifestations on the other hand. Focusing on counternarratives with such a conceptualization in mind has several implications.

First of all, this means that empire-critical analyses of early Christian texts in terms of counternarratives have the potential of *contributing to larger discussions* about the negotiation of power dynamics. Biblical studies are in this way offered a chance (one that they should appreciate, in my opinion!) to reinforce the case that they are an essential voice within the humanities. This relates to very broad-sweeping discussions about negotiating power in general, but also to discussions of more limited scope, such as the place of marginalized groups within the Roman Empire.

One mid-term goal thus must be to take into consideration early Christian counternarratives to dominant Roman ones alongside similar counternarratives by *other* marginalized groups.¹⁷ One of the reasons why the study of these ancient texts remains so important is because they offer us a rather rare window into how minorities, as minorities, dealt with Roman rule during the early principate.¹⁸

Second, however, it is likewise to be expected that there will be a *downstream effect* from this interdisciplinary dialogue that can enrich NT studies. Looking at early Christian texts as testaments of an oppressed group next to others as *one* among several valid lines of inquiry does not diminish their value but, rather, sheds new light on these texts in a way that also enriches their study as testaments of the emerging Christian faith. For as recent research has shown, we learn most about the situation of early Christians under Roman rule if we do not focus on them primarily *as* Christians but as one minority among many.¹⁹

¹⁶ Lueg, Bager, and Lundholt, “Introduction,” 4–5, citing Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, rev. and enl. ed. (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957).

¹⁷ See Tim Whitmarsh, “Resistance is Futile? Greek Literary Tactics in the Face of Rome,” in *Les Grecs héritiers des Romains*, ed. Paul Schubert, *Entretiens sur l’Antiquité classique* 59 (Geneva: Hardt Foundation, 2013), 57–78, for Greek literature under Roman rule.

¹⁸ On this entire line of inquiry, see James Corke-Webster, “Trouble in Pontus: The Pliny-Trajan Correspondence on the Christians Reconsidered,” *TAPA* 147 (2017): 371–411, and my attempts to build on his research in Heilig, *Apostle*, chapter 1.

¹⁹ Corke-Webster, “Trouble,” 406.

Most importantly, looking at early Christian anti-imperial counternarratives against the broader backdrop of counternarratives in general has the potential of managing our expectations in a healthy way, namely by sensitizing us to the *variegated kinds* of counternarratives that are possible, which will prevent us from interpreting early Christian stories monolithically against the backdrop of the Roman Empire. When emphasizing this necessity of nuance, I have in particular two parameters in mind, which I want to explicate shortly in what follows.

First, I think we need to carefully analyze the *pragmatics* of these stories. Even if they somehow deal with the “topic” of Rome, it is by no means clear that they are, for example, addressed *to the elites*²⁰ – nor that they, to choose the opposite of the spectrum, reflect a kind of unfiltered internal storytelling with simply consoling function.²¹

The history of research in empire criticism should come as a warning sign to us in this respect. Especially concerning the notion of “hidden transcripts” (cf. also Laura Robinson in this volume), it can be seen that early research on empire criticism in early Christianity was marked by assumptions rather than careful consideration of the theoretically existing options. Ironically, one party (consisting of both proponents and critics of the approach!) believed Paul’s letters to be entirely *private* and, thus, “hidden transcripts in pure form.” At the same time, others (again, both scholars sympathetic and antipathetic to anti-imperial readings of the NT!) assumed the opposite idea of them constituting “hidden transcripts in veiled form” that infiltrated the *public* sphere.²² Interpreting early Christian narratives *as* counternarratives gives us a chance to learn early on from the variegated nature of such stories in other contexts. I will explicitly return to this parameter later.

Second, I am convinced that keeping an eye on the transdisciplinary discourse on counternarratives will also teach us that there is not just *one* kind of counternarrative within any group that we would characterize generally as “oppressed” – because there is never just one hierarchical societal relationship that is determinative for the individuals in these groups. While in what follows I will focus on stories that I perceive to indeed critically interact with dominating narratives *from the Roman imperial realm*, I want to mark something here

²⁰ Such as the narrative portions in the original interaction between Jesus and Pilate (as renarrated for a *different* audience in Matt 27:11–14, Mark 15:2–5, Luke 23:3–4, and John 18:28–38; cf. the *ὁμολογία* in 1 Tim 6:13) and Paul’s appearance before Roman governors in threatening situations (handed down to us again only in a *secondary* reception context in Acts 18:12–17, 24:10–21, 25:8–12, 26:1–29).

²¹ There *are* such narratives, with different topics, such as 1 Thess 4:13–18 (though we are dealing here, strictly speaking, with a “protonarrative,” because it is predictively narrated, i.e., relates to the future: cf. Heilig, *Paul the Storyteller*, 188).

²² Cf. Heilig, *Hidden Criticism?*, chapter 2.

at the outset that also plays an important role in many of the other essays: The dynamics that I investigate here with respect to the Roman Empire could – and, often, should! – also be scrutinized on other fronts that early Christians dealt with in their daily lives.

Most obviously, this includes power dynamics vis-à-vis non-Roman outsiders. The Roman front was of course not the only frontier that early Christians, viewed as a unity, had to deal with during the time of the composition of the NT. Many of the controversies surrounding the adaptation of pagan motifs in early Christian writings can be understood along the lines of counternarratives.²³ With respect to attempts of othering Jews – as “the Jews” in general, or, a certain, other, kind of “real” Judaism – we likewise encounter the situation where stories from the Hebrew Bible and associated traditions are retold in different ways by contemporary Jews and followers of the Messiah Jesus.²⁴

At the same time, we must reckon with counternarratives that reflect the negotiation of *internal* hierarchies. For example, the thesis by Antoinette Wire, espoused in *The Corinthian Women Prophets*,²⁵ that women’s prophetic activities in Corinth disrupted male-dominated power structures within the church, could be analyzed along such lines. Paul’s responses, such as requiring head coverings (1 Corinthians 11) or silencing women in assemblies (1 Corinthians 14), are said to reflect his attempts to regulate these practices and reassert order. The stories that these prophets would have told about their own identity and how they came to the place in the church that they think they are meant to occupy could arguably be construed precisely in terms of a counternarrative to a dominating male narrative that Paul ultimately adopts and retells. Similarly, Dale Martin, in *The*

²³ For example, see Peter Wick, “Jesus gegen Dionysos? Ein Beitrag zur Kontextualisierung des Johannesevangeliums,” *Bib* 85 (2004): 179–98, on an interpretation of the Gospel of John as a counternarrative to the myth of Dionysos. Note how he comes close to the notion of counternarratives in his conclusions but then shifts the terminology to “argumentation: “Die parallelisierende und überbietende Gegenüberstellung von Jesus und dionysischen Motiven scheint tatsächlich eine Argumentationsstrategie zu sein, mit der der Evangelist arbeitet und die sich wie ein Netz über das ganze Evangelium ausbreitet” (p. 194). It seems to me that the notion of “persuasion” is more appropriate here. Persuasion and argumentation are not the same. The former has to do with text function, the latter with textualization strategy. In principle, they are independent. See Heilig, *Paul*, chapter 3.

²⁴ Though perhaps we need to be more careful to view renarrations in early Christian sources as mere reactions. Jonas Müller, *Mehr als eine Reaktion: Eine Untersuchung der Rolle Abrahams in der galatischen Auseinandersetzung und ihrer Plausibilität im frühjüdischen Abrahamsdiskurs* (PhD diss., University of Munich, 2025), now makes the case that it is Paul who introduced Abraham as a narrative character in Galatians because he can pick up elements within early Jewish discourse that fit his communicative goal. In other words, it is not the opponents who simply repeat a dominant (“the Jewish”) narrative, with Paul then being forced to produce a counternarrative.

²⁵ Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul’s Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

Corinthian Body,²⁶ examines how disputes over spiritual gifts mirrored social inequalities, with wealthier members asserting dominance. According to him, Paul's response, emphasizing the metaphor of the church as a unified body, seeks to reconcile these conflicts by assigning each individual a role within the community. However, Martin notes that this metaphor does not eliminate hierarchy but rather reinforces it in subtler ways by legitimizing a structured distribution of roles. In other words, we should not simplistically imagine Paul to have been only a man of the resistance, subverting dominating Roman stories by his counternarratives. Rather, we can assume him to have had some talent in that regard because we can see from other interactions that he was engaged in exercising power through storytelling himself.

I have made these quick side glances here to make the point that when dealing with early Christian texts we have to be open to the possibility that we are dealing with a variety of different kinds of counternarratives, on different levels, sometimes being told perhaps with even opposing interests. In the long-term, anti-imperial counternarratives must thus be placed in the context of other kinds of early Christian counternarratives. And once we broaden our perspective in such a way, we might learn something from how certain Christians opposed certain – not inherently imperial – power structures through storytelling, so that we can then come back to anti-imperial counternarratives with more nuanced categories. In the short-term, however, I do think that these foci on other kinds of power dynamics can be distracting. We can only focus on one thing at a time. And illuminating one controversial group interaction with another understudied one is not particularly helpful.²⁷ I view what follows thus as a very limited but also entirely appropriate first building block toward a much larger discourse that emerges on the horizon.

In closing this section, I must acknowledge that there are also methodological limitations that come with these suggested side-glances at other kinds of counternarratives. One is that the dominating non-Roman narratives within wider society as well as non-standard Christian counternarratives to which the canonical texts react are themselves often a matter of, mere, *reconstruction*, and, thus, prone to speculation. Moreover, it can certainly be debated whether the claims that these parties made about themselves were indeed presented *in narrative form* – instead of, for example, a rather *descriptive* account or presented as the result of an *argument*.²⁸ Thus there is certainly a danger of filtering entire power struggles through a narrative lens – which can result in fascinating stories

²⁶ Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

²⁷ See Christoph Heilig, "Das Neue Testament im Schatten des Imperiums," VF 68 (*Neues Testament und Politik*, ed. Moisés Mayordomo) (2023): 27, on pieces such as Beth M. Sheppard, "The Gospel of John," in *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Adam Winn, RBS 84 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016), 97–110.

²⁸ On narration as one of several different textualization strategies, see Heilig, *Paul*, 162–81.

... that, ultimately, are nothing but *our* narrativization about events in the past never conceptualized in narrative form by the people we talk about.²⁹ (What mitigates this problem at least to some extent is that often we can identify “protonarratives” – potential, perhaps originally explicit – narratives as substructures undergirding descriptive or argumentative passages.³⁰) Lastly, it must of course be noted that the entire enterprise of analyzing human interaction *as* power struggle is itself not at all self-evident and involves many ideological presuppositions, at least when presupposed as an all-encompassing framework.³¹

2.2 Applying Narratological Categories as Heuristic Tools

The last section has delineated how the invocation of counternarratives as a mid-level theory offers lots of prospects with respect to developing empire criticism of the NT and other early Christian texts into a research field that can flourish in a *larger* transdisciplinary dialogue.

For the moment, however, we need to focus on the other direction, namely on the more specific theoretical framework and the methodological rules that govern the textual analysis on a *lower* level, on the level of actual textual analysis. After all, the notion of counternarratives does not, rightly understood, offer a fixed set of tools for empirical research. Rather, in order to be able to bridge the gulf between the texts in front of us and the discourse surrounding counternarratives on the other side, we need to integrate two aspects into our approach.

First, as the basis of our entire endeavor, we need a sound *theory of interpretation*³² in order to be able to give an account of what (it means to say that a text) “means” (something), including the communicative meaning, the pragmatic dimension of the text.³³ To be in that situation, we need to do two things. As a first step, we need to explicate our *notion of meaning*, i.e., we need to clarify where this meaning is located (in the mind of the author, for example). Sub-

²⁹ Cf. Heilig, *Paul*, 334–59, on this danger.

³⁰ Heilig, *Paul*, 316–17.

³¹ The literature on this is vast and comes from a variety of difficult angles, some of course coming from an “anti-Marxist” point-of-view, others, however, remaining rooted in leftist thought.

³² On theories of interpretation, see Tom Kindt und Hans-Harald Müller, “Wieviel Interpretation enthalten Beschreibungen? Überlegungen zu einer umstrittenen Unterscheidung am Beispiel der Narratologie,” in *Regeln der Bedeutung: Zur Theorie der Bedeutung literarischer Texte*, ed. Fotis Jannidis, Gerhard Lauer, Matias Martínez, and Simone Winko, Revisionen 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 286–304. On the descriptive status of narratology, see Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, “Narrative Theory and/or/as Theory of Interpretation,” in *What Is Narratology? Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory*, ed. Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, Narratologia 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 205–19. On both, cf. Heilig, *Paul*, 40–45.

³³ On pragmatics as one layer of meaning, see Heilig, *Paul*, 145–52.

sequently, we need to come up with guidelines, a set of methods, of *how* we can reach this goal. With respect to the dominating approach within biblical studies, explicating these two steps would amount to nothing less than an account of what constitutes the “historical-critical method” (which is not a method but an interpretation theory!).

Obviously, there is no place here to even sketch such a framework, as fundamental as it arguably is for then, subsequently, dealing with the question of whether the meaning eventually found is, in fact, “counterimperial” or not. It may not have been such, for example, in the consciousness of an author – but these texts could still have appeared subversive in the mind of plausible recipients, such as Roman citizens or even officials who might have come into contact with early Christian texts and who might have been used to other kinds of stories! I will try to at least point to the fundamental implication of such a differentiation in my analysis of actual texts. But it needs to be emphasized that discussions of whether or not a specific story can count as a “counternarrative” is moot if there is no prior understanding of whether we as participants in the discourse even presuppose the same interpretation theory.

Second, we can only expect the analysis of NT texts to contribute anything to the discussion surrounding counternarratives if we are working with a precise understanding of narratological categories – namely as a set of *descriptive categories* that have the potential both to stimulate our interpretation in certain ways by making us look into specific directions and also to serve as tools for describing the results of our interpretative acts of stories in a way that it facilitates communication about central features of what these stories “mean.” In other words, it is important to note that narratology – rightly understood (“rightly,” as I see it, at least) – does not tell us how to interpret a story. For that, we need – to reiterate this point once more – interpretation theories (which, by the way, also works for *non*-narrative texts). Moreover, it is not even guaranteed that the application of a narratological category such as “order” or “focalization” will yield much benefit for our understanding of the text’s meaning. However, these categories have at least the *potential* to have such a positive heuristic effect.

Thus, in the remainder of this chapter I want to explore how at least some early Christian stories can be illuminated if we apply specific narratological categories to them. As I will try to demonstrate, the attention to this micro-level of textual analysis will shine a spotlight on aspects of the meaning of these texts that have the potential of significantly contributing to the discussion surrounding “counternarratives” – Christian ones and non-Christian ones, anti-imperial ones and those with other fronts in view.

In what follows, I will concentrate on Paul – because his writings are my primary area of expertise, because a lot of discussion in empire criticism is centered around his letters, and because he comes with the unique advantage that he presents us with “miniature narratives” of just a couple of words or

sentences, so that we can deal with them more easily in their entirety.³⁴ Moreover, we have *plenty* of evidence that Paul is indeed a storyteller who is capable of masterfully countering stories that are in circulation. He even shows some astonishing *awareness* of what he is doing, for example, when he counters stories about apostolic accomplishments by imitating them in style but choosing, very explicitly, entirely different events than one might expect (2 Cor 11:16–33) or when he, right after that, pretends to tell a great story of a heavenly journey only to then disappoint expectations again and again (2 Cor 12:1–6).³⁵

Still, limitations of space will permit me only to focus on some facets of these passages. This means that I will also have to be very selective with respect to which narratological categories I will refer to explicitly. In theory, all categories that can be used to describe stories can potentially be used for identifying a critical intertextual relationship between dominating Roman narratives and critical counternarratives by early Christians. A systematic analysis in the near future would be very important.

Here I can only paint a picture of the parameters that are associated with stories using very broad strokes.³⁶ A story is a text (or text part) about at least two events that are chronologically and logically connected. A story might oppose another story thus simply by objecting to something as basic as the choice of events, by painting a different picture of *what* actually happened. For example, it has often been claimed that Paul's story about himself in Gal 1–2 explicitly opposes a version about his past in which he received his gospel from humans (cf. 1:11).³⁷

Disputing the chronology or how events interrelate in terms of causal effects can have similarly fundamental effects on what we call the "plot" of the story. For example, note how in Gal 1:16 the focus seems to be on the fact that it was not "immediately" that Paul consulted local Christian authorities or the apostles in Jerusalem (εὐθέως οὐ προσανεθέμην σαρκὶ καὶ αἵματι),³⁸ which does leave room open for a valid story in which he later did, in fact, communicate with these parties and significantly learn from them. Especially with respect to causal connections in the broadest sense, we regularly observe that Paul accepts a basic storyline but puts a lot of emphasis on which event causes which. For example, in Rom 4:9–12, he retells the story of Abraham in a way that faith leads to a righteous status, with circumcision only serving as a "sign" (v. 11; in Gal 3:15–17 he *omits* the event of Abraham's circumcision).

³⁴ To be sure, they still very much belong to a literary context that is important for their interpretation. See Heilig, *Paul*, chapter 3, specifically pp. 182–97 (on how "narration-specific tasks" are implemented in the act of communication).

³⁵ Heilig, *Paul*, 184–88 and 300–4.

³⁶ For details, I must refer to Heilig, *Paul*, chapter 1.

³⁷ Cf. Heilig, *Paulus*, 492–511. I only touch on this in passing in Heilig, *Paul*, because I plan to write an entire narratological commentary on Galatians in English, which will incorporate my manifold observations on Galatians, which is arguably the main evidence in Heilig, *Paulus*.

³⁸ But cf. also Heilig, *Paulus*, 638–39 on the syntax.

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