

Christoph Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire. Paul's Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2022). Pp. 192 + xxii. ISBN 978-0-8028-8223-3

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The imperial context of Paul's teaching is still a relatively young area of research which, according to N.T. Wright, has not yet clearly entered the history of interpretation of the apostle's writings.¹ It is combined with the broader "Paul and politics" category and assigned to social science and post-colonial approaches to Paul. Some label it simply as "empire criticism," in a way that one would speak of literary or rhetorical criticism. An author who has undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of this approach was Richard A. Horsley, with his three volumes dedicated to that subject.² Over the last few years, there have also been numerous publications attempting critical assessments of empire criticism. Those include the recent work *The Apostle and the Empire. Paul's Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome* by Christopher Heilig. The author is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Basel, Switzerland. He has pursued theology and biblical studies in Germany and Scotland and received a doctorate from the University of Zurich. His other publications include: *Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul* (2015); *Paul's Triumph. Reassessing 2 Corinthians 2:14 in Its Literary and Historical Context* (2017); and *God and the Faithfulness of Paul* (2017), which he coedited with J. Thomas Hewitt and Michael F. Bird.

As can be seen, Christopher Heilig has already published on empire criticism. The latest book *The Apostle and the Empire* revisits the issue of hidden subtext associated with this approach, which the author addressed in *Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul* (2015). He also refers to the research contained in *Paul's Triumph. Reassessing 2 Corinthians 2:14 in Its Literary and Historical Context*. The monograph *The Apostle and the Empire* consists of five chapters, preceded by an Introduction and followed by a Conclusion. It offers Bibliography, Index of

¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul. Fresh Perspectives* (London: SPCK 2005) 79.

² R.A. Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Empire. Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity 1997); R.A. Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics. Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation. Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity 2000); R.A. Horsley (ed.), *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (London: Continuum 2004).

Authors, Index of Subjects, and Index of Scripture and Other Ancient Texts. The Foreword to the book was contributed by John M.G. Barclay, who, while not an enthusiast of empire criticism, emphasises the role that Heilig's publications have played in the study of hidden subtext in Paul, praises the author's nuanced approach to Paul's attitude towards the Empire (his refusal to accept the binary "all or nothing" alternatives, xii) and describes the present monograph as "the enormous stimulus," taking "a significant step forward—further than others and further than his own earlier work on this subject" (xiv).

In the Preface, the author explains his return to the question of whether or not Paul's letters exhibit a "coded" criticism of Caesar with the emergence of new voices in the discussion. They belong to an early career scholar, Laura Robinson, who in an article published in 2021 argues against the presence of hidden anti-imperial transcript in Paul.³ In the Introduction (pp. 1–4), Heilig briefly accentuates the changing political atmosphere surrounding the research on this issue and sets the recent book in the context of his previous publications. Once again, there is a reference to the essay by Laura Robinson, who will be an important discussion partner for the author.

In Chapter 1, "The Classical Subtext-Hypothesis" (pp. 5–34), the author begins by recalling the Wright-Barclay debate, which is an important reference point for any contemporary discussion on the anti-imperial subtext hypothesis. Referring to a series of necessary conditions of Wright's hypothesis individuated by Barclay, the author dwells longer on the fifth and final criterion. It suggests that expressing anti-imperial criticism in hidden subtext does not harmonise with the personality of Paul, who elsewhere in his letters explicitly criticises idolatry and the rulers of this world (1 Cor 2:6). Heilig had already suggested in his earlier publications that another, more convincing rationale must be found if the subtext hypothesis is to be considered plausible. The impetus for rethinking this issue was provided by the aforementioned publication by Robinson, whose main thoughts the author summarises, with which he disputes, and most of whose conclusions he rejects later in Chapter 1 (pp. 11–34).

Robinson suggests that there simply is no hidden subtext in Paul's letters. His epistles would not be considered "seditious" by the Empire, and the Empire itself had no mechanisms to control them. Rome was not a "policy state", and the apostle, according to Robinson, did not need to hide his attitude to authority, being, after all, put in Roman prisons while preaching the gospel. Agreeing with the conclusion regarding the lack of institutions controlling free speech in Rome, Heilig nevertheless draws attention to the marginal position of the Christian church, exposed at any time to the outbreak of persecution, trials or even the death penalty, as illustrated by Pliny the Younger's letters to Trajan. According to the author, "[...] following the Christian faith had *always* been dangerous because *no* law against it was needed to execute members of the congregations" (p. 18); "the *nomen ipsum*—the fact of calling oneself a Christian alone—was a punishable crime because

3 L. Robinson, "Hidden Transcripts?: The Supposedly Self-Censoring Paul and Rome as Surveillance State in Modern Pauline Scholarship," *New Testament Studies* 67/1 (2021) 55–72.

it went hand in hand with troublesome behavior” (p. 20). “Christians could have been executed just as well before Trajan’s rescript and if there never was a legal requirement, e.g., an edict that established this process in the first place, this means that there *never* was a period in the early church when being a Christian was not potentially dangerous—and this includes the time of Paul’s missionary activity.” (pp. 21–22). Mere suspicions of anti-social behavior could easily lead to trials and convictions. Therefore, the author concludes, “at the time of Paul being a Christian was ‘punishable’ in practice even though it was not ‘prohibited’ in theory” (p. 25). Ultimately, according to Heilig, “the Roman Empire might not have been a ‘police state’ but this does not mean that Christians would have enjoyed unfettered religious liberty, as Robinson seems to imply. To the contrary, it is precisely the lack of clear legal regulations in the background of Pliny’s behavior which makes it plausible that similar things could have happened also much earlier.” (p. 31).

Having laid these foundations, in Chapter 2, “Beyond Hidden Criticism” (pp. 35–54), the author proceeds to re-examine the rationale behind the argument that Paul may have used hidden subtext in his letters. At that point, Heilig advocates a departure from a dichotomous approach, proposing a nuanced reading of “Paul’s behavior as a *constantly negotiated compromise* between what was necessary to remain truthful to the gospel and what was necessary for the proclamation of the gospel to even remain possible.” (p. 36). What it also means is that, when looking for Paul’s critique of the Empire and the presence of a hidden transcript in his letters, one has to take into account the nature and circumstances of the community and the nature of Paul’s particular correspondence (did the apostle consider his attitude to the Empire to be an important issue to communicate to the community?). Ultimately, the author is inclined to conclude that hidden criticism in Paul’s letters is “not well concealed at all but rather out there in the open” (p. 49). A closer look at Pauline epistles and the condensed narrative that is typical to the apostle, allows one to see not so much hidden as “*overlooked* criticism—or overlooked indications for Pauline discontent with the Roman Empire” (p. 54).

Chapter 3, “Rediscovering Contemporary Contexts” (pp. 55–71), is a practical illustration of what the author claimed in Chapter 2, i.e. how easy it is to overlook the Roman (anti-imperial) context of Paul’s letters and how careful an observer of Roman reality the apostle was. This is exemplified by Heilig’s reading of 2 Cor 2:14, which alludes to Roman triumphal processions. The author proposes an interpretation of the notoriously difficult verb *thriambeuo* which, according to him, portrays God to be the triumphator in a procession in which Paul and his co-workers appear as captives presented to the watching crowd (p. 60). The image evokes associations with Rome and, according to the author, with a particular emperor whom Paul might have in mind – Claudius and his triumphal procession of 44 CE, celebrated to mark the conquest of Britain. What makes such an interpretation plausible, according to Heilig, is the discovery of the inscriptions, testifying to the presence of a priest of the personified goddess Victoria Britannica in Corinth, and accordingly to a cult centred on the military victory that had secured Claudius his triumphal procession (p. 69). In Chapter 4, “Reconstructing Unease” (pp. 71–101), the author

consequently reconstructs Paul's unease with the Roman Empire by reading 2 Cor 2:14 in the context of the public Roman transcript (p. 71). What the apostle may be criticising here is the very person of Claudius and the dubious nature of his triumph, as well as the attitude of the Corinthians as spectators of Paul's preaching. Above all, however, Paul confronts the emperor and Christ in the universal, global, timeless and iterative aspects of their triumph, additionally casting the God of Israel, suspicious for the Romans, in the role of the triumphator. The transcript that emerges from the reading of 2 Cor 2:14 represents a critical interaction with "Rome," her contemporary politics and larger ideological structures (p. 101). The message, according to the author, is not hidden but simply overlooked.

Chapter 5, "Sharpening Our Exegetical Senses" (pp. 102–134), represents a kind of broader conclusions that the author draws from his reading of 2 Cor 2:14, answering the question: "What has caused our blindness and how can we sharpen our senses so that we do not miss important aspects of the text" (p. 102). Heilig is convinced that exploring the overlooked interaction between Paul and the Empire is the right direction. In a long excursus on Rom 13:1–7, he argues for a serious consideration of "postcolonial sensitivities" and a more nuanced reading of the apostle's both critical and negotiating attitude towards Rome. The fact that important social and political layers to Paul's message are notoriously missing in commentaries and scholarly studies is also, according to the author, a sign of the weakness of contemporary exegesis, which should be based more on a cognitive-linguistic approach, making extensive use of literature, coinage, papyri, inscriptions, and reliefs, searchable online and available thanks to "digital humanities." Following Stanley Porter, Heilig argues that a new format of biblical commentaries (specialised, focused on one aspect of the text) is needed as the existing formula seems to be exhausted, leading only to the repetition of information and interpretations already in circulation. In Conclusions (pp. 135–142), the author summarises his reflections on "hidden transcript" in the context of the Wright-Barclay discussion, and refers to Robinson, with whose thesis he ultimately disagrees. Once again, Heilig reiterates his deduction regarding the presence of an open but overlooked critique of the Empire in Paul, which is worth exploring, but whose presence must each time be proven. He also repeats his call for a new type of exegesis that would open the eyes and ears of biblical scholars to the "echoes of the Empire."

Christopher Heilig's *The Apostle and the Empire* is an important publication within the current of empire criticism. The work, while building significantly on the author's earlier monographs, decidedly moves forward the discussion on the hidden transcript in Paul. The idea of an "overlooked anti-imperial subtext" is intriguing, opening also to further questions. Has Paul's anti-imperial message been overlooked only by the majority of the contemporary scholars or also by his historical audience? If the latter group also remained immune to the apostle's subtext, how does this attest to his rhetorical competence? Perhaps, after all, this is a secondary message that Paul was not concerned with in Corinth or Rome? This would be understandable given the uncertainty about the fate of Christians in the Empire that Heilig sketches so convincingly. The author's philological analyses of *thriambeuo* in 2 Cor 2:14 are detailed, reliable and thoroughly convincing. Heilig's historical exegesis

and its conclusions may seem more problematic. Is it indeed the case that in 2 Cor 2:14 Paul criticises the Corinthians for their spectator attitude? There are also opponents of the apostle in Corinth, and the context of the Roman triumphal procession may interestingly indicate that they are keen to gain the applause of the community. It seems from Paul's argumentative strategy in 2 Corinthians that the apostle's criticism is aimed more at his adversaries than at the Corinthians. By portraying himself as a captive of the crucified Christ, the apostle goes against the grain of their triumphalist style of preaching. One sometimes has the impression that in Heilig's analysis, remarkably rich in historical and cultural references, Paul's argumentation and the wider theological perspective are lost. This is always the danger of the detailed historical-cultural analyses which the author advocates so much, and which sometimes leave no room for other layers. Be that as it may, Christopher Heilig's *The Apostle and the Empire* is an excellent book, indicating the fruitfulness of empire criticism in Pauline studies. It should definitely be read by anyone interested in the imperial context of Pauline churches.

