

REVIEW: MCKNIGHT, SCOT, AND JOSEPH B. MODICA (EDS.). *JESUS IS LORD, CAESAR IS NOT*. ILLINOIS: IVP ACADEMIC, 2013.

*Jesus is Lord, Caesar is Not* provides an evaluation of empire criticism's contribution to New Testament studies. Empire criticism is summarised as "developing an eye and ear for the presence of Rome and the worship of the emperor in the lines and between the lines of New Testament writings" (McKnight and Modica, 2013, 16). This relatively recent method of Biblical studies highlights the all-pervasive presence of the Roman Empire and the Imperial cult in the lives and minds of the early church. In light of this, it "asks us to stand up and notice that the message of the gospel was at once spiritual and subversive of empire, that it was both a powerful redemptive message and a cry for liberation" (McKnight and Modica, 2013, 17). In light of the Imperial cult's oppressive presence, the New Testament needs to be read as a collection of subversive writings, aimed at opposing the Empire, declaring the reign of the Lord Jesus and helping Christians to live in the Empire.

In chapter one, David Nystrom outlines the social and religious landscape of Rome, highlighting the central role of the imperial cult in maintaining the Roman Empire. He explains that "the imperial strategy was to link the traditional ideology of Roman rule with the imperial house... Augustus and his successors employed the imperial cult... to instruct provincials on the patterns and benefits of *Romanitas* and so further the Roman project" (2013, 35-36).

Following on from this, Judith Diehl offers an overview of how recent scholarly approaches to the New Testament through historical, theoretical and literary lenses have led to an understanding of early Christian anti-imperialism. Historically speaking, all levels of Roman society were saturated with Roman ideology and the Imperial cult. This meant that the Christians' "bold devotion to Jesus Christ as Lord and King put them in grave danger with the authorities" (Diehl, 2013, 46).

Theoretical developments, particularly post-colonial literary theories, have highlighted the impact of empire upon the subjugated people. Investigations into how conquered people 'write back' to subvert the empire have been applied to the New Testament, illuminating the subversive effect of using politicised Roman language such as 'Saviour' and 'good news' (Diehl, 2013, 64). Diehl's discussion of literary approaches continues the focus on subversive and coded language and also investigates the use of rhetoric in first century argumentation.

In chapters three to ten, eight New Testament scholars assess empire critical readings of a selection of New Testament books. Positively, the contributors acknowledge the importance of the empire critics' focus on the Roman context of the New Testament. There is also general agreement that much of the language used in the New Testament would be interpreted by the Romans as subversive, seditious and opposed to the Emperor. Michael Bird points out that much of the language concerning Jesus opposes Roman ideology. Not only is it the language, but the "apocalyptic and messianic narrative that such language is couched in that makes it tacitly counterimperial" (2013, 161). Joel Willitts (2013, 97) and Allan Bevere (2013, 195) both note that any Roman official reading the New Testament would see that the gospel message stood in opposition to Imperial ideology.

However, the contributors to *Jesus is Lord, Caesar is Not* challenge empire criticism on a number of points. Firstly, they bring in to question whether Rome is much of a priority for the New Testament authors at all. Christopher Skinner describes Rome in the Gospel of John as the "backdrop to the wider story, but... should not be confused with the story" (2013, 128). Drew Strait argues that opposition is between Jesus' kingdom and Satan's kingdom, not Jesus and Caesar (2013, 141). Dwight Sheets comes to the conclusion that Revelation is not so much on the evil of the Roman empire as the importance of Christians not conforming to the empire (2013, 209). So while Rome is very present in the New Testament, mounting an offensive against the Empire was not the primary purpose of the authors.

Secondly, much of the empire critical perspective relies on Roman terminology being 'subverted' by the New Testament authors. As Willitts suggests, "It presumes that the empire is the only constellation of imaginative resources upon which the Gospel writer draws" (2013, 96). Willitts and Bird (2013, 161) both acknowledge that Old Testament imagery also contributes heavily to the New Testament understanding of Jesus as Lord and King. If either the Roman or Jewish contributions are lost, our understanding of Scripture will be stunted.

Thirdly, the authors question the reliance upon post-colonial literary theory. Particularly, the significance of coded language in post-colonial literature does not seem applicable in the New Testament texts. Lynn Cohick reminds us that in Philippians Paul "is boldly proclaiming the gospel in the context of a Roman imprisonment... not using code in place where one might assume he would" (2013, 175). Even the coded language of Revelation would be easily interpreted by the first century reader (Sheets, 2013, 197).

The consensus of the editors and most contributors to this book is that while empire criticism does offer some helpful contributions to New Testament studies, it is not always applicable. As McKnight and Modica state in their conclusion, “We believe that the New Testament writers do indeed address the concerns highlighted by empire criticism. But we also strongly suggest that this is not their primary *modus operandi* (2013, 212).

While empire criticism should not be the only lens through which we read the New Testament, it does provide a timely reminder that the New Testament was written in a context of opposition and persecution within an Empire with ideologies that contradicted the Gospel. The call was not to politically overthrow the empire, but to live with Jesus as *Lord* while also living under Caesar as *lord*, and persevering through whatever trials that may bring.

The twentieth century church also exists in a culture with profoundly different value systems, ideologies and gods. Where the Australian Church may once have felt secure in a “Christian nation”, it is increasingly true that to be followers of Jesus will put Christians at odds with the culture around them. The church needs to be careful to not conform to the surrounding culture, but to use the Gospel as the lens through which it assesses that culture. The challenge for those in pastoral ministry and church leadership is to help Christians navigate their way through this clash, while still leading the church in the mission of proclaiming Jesus as Lord.

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