EJT (2011) 20:1, 40–50 0960–2720

The quest for the political Paul: assessing the apostle's approach to Empire

Ed Mackenzie

SUMMARY

In recent years a number of interpreters have argued that Paul's theology was politically subversive. The routes to such a conclusion, however, have been diverse. Some interpreters argue that Paul was explicitly hostile to the Roman Empire, pointing to parallels between the vocabulary of Paul's theology and that of Roman imperial ideology. Others contend that the shape of Paul's gospel implicitly conflicted with the honours bestowed on the emperor. Still others focus on the social implications of Pauline theology. This article focuses on three different approaches to the political Paul, explores criticisms of such approaches, and offers an assessment of recent research in this area. The first approach is rejected but the other two are not therefore accepted uncritically. It is argued that Paul sought to minimise potential conflict with the Roman Empire, focusing instead on God's work in Christ.

* * * * * * * *

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In den letzten Jahren haben nicht wenige Ausleger das Argument vertreten, die Theologie des Paulus sei subversiv gewesen. Die Wege zu einer derartigen Schlussfolgerung aber sind vielfältig. Einige Interpreten behaupten, dass Paulus ausgesprochen feindlich dem Römischen Reich gegenüber eingestellt war und wiesen dabei auf Parallelen zwischen dem Vokabular der paulinischen Theologie und jenem der Ideologie des Römischen Reiches hin. Andere halten dagegen, dass der Charakter des paulinischen Evangeliums natürlicherweise in Konflikt stand zu den Ehrenbezeigungen, die dem Kaiser zu zollen waren. Wiederum andere Ausleger lenken das Augenmerk auf die sozialen Implikationen der Theologie von Paulus. Der vorliegende Artikel konzentriert sich auf drei unterschiedliche Ansätze zum politischen Paulus, erforscht ihre Kritik und bietet eine Bewertung der jüngeren Forschung auf diesem Gebiet an. Der erste Ansatz wird verworfen, doch dies heißt nicht, dass die beiden übrigen unkritische Zustimmung finden. Das Argument geht dahin, dass Paulus danach trachtete, das Konfliktpotential mit dem Römischen Reich so gering wie möglich zu halten und sich stattdessen auf Gottes Werk in Christus zu konzentrieren.

* * * * * * * *

RÉSUMÉ

Ces dernières années, un certain nombre d'exégètes ont soutenu que la théologie paulinienne était politiquement subversive. Diverses routes sont empruntées pour parvenir à cette conclusion. Certains considèrent que Paul était explicitement hostile à l'empire romain : ils s'appuient sur des parallèles entre le vocabulaire de Paul et celui de l'idéologie impériale romaine. D'autres soulignent que l'Évangile prêché par l'apôtre entrait implicitement en conflit avec les honneurs rendus à l'empereur. D'autres encore mettent en avant les implications sociales de la théologie paulinienne. Cet article expose trois approches différentes de la politique de Paul, examine les critiques qui leur ont été adressées et offre une évaluation des recherches récentes dans ce domaine. La première des trois approches est écartée mais les deux autres ne sont pas pour autant acceptées sans réserve. L'auteur tente de montrer que Paul cherchait à prévenir un conflit potentiel avec l'empire romain et qu'il s'est plutôt attaché à présenter l'œuvre de Dieu en Christ.

* * * * * * * *

Introduction

The quest for the 'political Paul' – a Paul who critiqued, criticised or undermined the Roman Empire – has become an increasingly significant movement in New Testament studies.[1] Its development can be linked to a wider recognition that the political context of the New Testament should be taken more seriously[2] as well as to recent studies exploring the relationship between the early Christians and the imperial cult.[3] Hermeneutical concerns have also shaped research in this area. Just as the *Shoah* or *Holocaust* has led New Testament scholars to re-evaluate older constructions of Second Temple Judaism,[4] so too the misappropriation of Romans 13:1-7 in the history of the church has fed the desire to advocate a Paul critical of empire. If Romans 13:1-7, in which Paul calls for believers to 'subordinate' themselves to the governing authorities, is Paul's only teaching on the State, then this can justify (and has justified) quiescent and submissive attitudes to political power within the modern world. Classic examples are found among German Christians in the Third Reich, as well as the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.[5] On the other hand, if Paul critiqued ancient empire, he might also offer a source for undermining the abuse of political power today. Paul can be appropriated as a critic of 'Pax Americana', globalisation and free-market profiteering, and so speak powerfully to today's context.[6]

Advocates of the political Paul seek to argue their case on solidly historical-critical grounds. At a broad level, all agree that close links existed between theology and politics in the ancient world, and all stress the importance of Roman imperial ideology. Beyond these agreements, however, scholars adopt a wide range of approaches in their pursuit of the political Paul. This article explores three approaches that advocate a politically subversive Paul, outlines recent criticisms of such approaches and ends with an assessment of the apostle's approach to empire.

Approaches to the political Paul

Three distinctive approaches support a political reading of Paul, focusing respectively on Paul's *critique* of empire, Paul's *subversion* of imperial ideology and Paul's *ecclesial alternative* to imperial society. The first two approaches prioritise the conflict between Paul and imperial ideology, differing on the extent of such conflict and the degree to which Paul's critique is explicit. The third approach prioritises the social consequences of Paul's theology, exploring its implications for the relationship of believers to the imperial world. Although scholars straddle such categories, they illustrate different approaches to the political Paul, and the distinctions are – it is hoped – heuristically useful.[7]

Scholars adopting the first approach identify Pauline texts and themes that confront Roman imperial ideology, and argue that these point to an overt critique of empire. In particular, linguistic and conceptual parallels between Pauline texts and imperial ideology are seen as indicative of Paul's deliberate attempt to undermine the Roman Empire or emperor.

Neil Elliott's *Liberating Paul* provides a good example of this approach.[8] Elliott argues that the church and academy have 'depoliticised' and 'domesticated' the apostle Paul.[9] Paul's letters have been subject to a 'canonical betrayal', placed alongside pseudonymous deutero-Paulines and accruing interpolations that endorsed the imperial order.[10] As well as its canonical distortion, the 'deJudaization' and 'mystification' of Paul's teaching have rendered mute Paul's politically explosive message.[11]

Following his critique of past scholarship, Elliott seeks to uncover the political character of Paul's theology, arguing that several themes and texts reveal the apostle's hostility to empire. The symbol of the cross, for example, is less about atonement and more about God's justice. The crucifixion of Jesus unveils the violence of Roman power, revealing God's 'partiality to the oppressed'.[12] The apocalyptic content of Paul's gospel also reveals its political nature, implying that the coming age of God's kingdom would soon bring the power of Rome to an end. Drawing on Paula Fredriksen, Elliott also argues that the pre-conversion Paul persecuted Jewish believers because he feared that the announcement of a Jewish Lord would lead Rome to persecute the Jewish community. For Elliott, Paul's belief that the gospel had such a political content remained even after his conversion.[13]

Elliott also draws attention to terms in Paul that conflicted with the same or similar terms in Roman imperial propaganda.[14] In Paul's letter to the Romans, for example, 'righteousness' (Greek *dikaiosunē*) and 'faith' (*pistis*), 'correspond to the Latin *ius* and *fides*, the lifeblood of Augustan propaganda'.[15] These parallels point to the conflict between Paul's gospel and Roman imperial ideology.

In treating the obvious counter to his case – Romans 13:1-7 – Elliott argues that the rhetori-

cal purpose of the text was to encourage Roman gentile believers to pay their taxes and so protect the vulnerable Jewish community in Rome. If riots took place in Rome due to revolts over taxes, the Jewish community would be the likely targets of imperial wrath, a consequence Paul wishes to prevent. Romans 13, then, is no theology of the state, but a rhetorically focused admonition that sought to protect a minority at risk.[16]

Elliott's more recent work, *The Arrogance of Nations*, offers a more cautious reconstruction of the political Paul that moves towards the second approach outlined below. Elliott concedes that certain 'ideological constraints' inhibited Paul from fully critiquing empire[17] but argues that imperial critique is evident throughout his letter to the Romans.[18] Adopting Hays' 'methodology' for detecting echoes of the Jewish Scriptures in the letters of Paul, Elliott suggests that an implicit critique of empire would be overheard by readers of Romans.[19] The chapter headings in the work reflect the key themes that Elliott addresses: Imperium (Empire); Iustitia (Justice); Clementia (mercy); Pietas (Piety) and Virtus (Virtue).

Other books could be chosen to illustrate this approach[20] but Elliott's *Liberating Paul* best illustrates the attempt to show that Paul was hostile to the pretensions and the power of empire. In this view, Paul's use of terms echoing the empire is not accidental or incidental, but reflects his intent to critique Roman imperial ideology.

A second approach in the quest for the political Paul focuses on the *implicit subversion* of Roman imperial ideology found in the Pauline corpus. Paul did not target the imperial cult or the Empire for specific criticism (as the first approach implies) nor did he advise believers to oppose the state (Romans 13:1-7), but Paul's gospel nonetheless undermined aspects of Roman imperial ideology. Advocates of this approach follow some of the same procedures as the former view, but tend to offer a more nuanced account of the conflict between Paul's gospel and empire.

N. T. Wright is the best known representative of this view.[21] He argues that Paul's theology *derived* from Judaism but *confronted* paganism.[22] As such, Paul's critique of the emperor was part of his broader conflict with pagan idolatry:

> Paul... was not opposed to Caesar's empire primarily because it was an empire, with all the unpleasant things we have learned to associate with that word, but because it was Caesar's, and because Caesar was claiming divine status and honours which belonged only to the one God.[23]

Like Elliott, Wright focuses on terminological parallels between Pauline theology and imperial ideology. Rather than focusing on an explicit critique of the Roman Empire, however, Wright argues that the logic of Paul's gospel undermined the imperial 'gospel' associated with Rome. An example is found in Wright's treatment of the 'righteousness of God' (*dikaiosunē theou*), which Wright interprets as God's faithfulness to the promises to the patriarchs.[24] Although rooted in the Jewish Scriptures, the righteousness of God undermines the 'justice' associated with the Roman Empire. For Paul, true peace and reconciliation are found in Christ (Romans 5:1ff.)[25] and such an assertion bluntly contradicts the imperial claim to bring 'peace' (Augustus, *Res gestae* 12-13; Horatius, *Odes* 4.5). Even Romans 13:1-7, apparently offering uncritical support to governing authorities, undercuts imperial ideology by reminding readers that the emperor is ultimately under God.[26]

At times, Wright makes fairly grandiose claims for Paul's political theology. The churches are described as 'colonial outposts of the empire that is to be'[27] and Philippians 3 is a 'coded challenge to Empire'.[28] Overall, however, Wright seeks to show that the logic of Paul's deeply Jewish gospel subverted pagan Rome's imperial ideology.[29]

Other scholars endorse this broad approach by drawing attention to the implicit tensions between Paul's gospel and imperial ideology.[30] The gospel and imperial ideology are treated as competing world-views and, as such, Paul's letters reveal an implicit critique of the Roman Empire.

A third approach to the political Paul focuses on the apostle's vision of an *ecclesial alternative to imperial society* and so draws attention on the social and political corollaries of Paul's view of church life. In this view, the politics of Paul consisted in his attempt to establish a network of relations that jeopardised the social structures of empire.

Robert Jewett's reading of Romans illustrates the approach.[31] Although Jewett maintains that Paul implicitly critiqued imperial ideology,[32] his primary focus is on the ways that Paul's vision of the church challenged the 'honour-shame' culture of ancient society:

> In the shameful cross, Christ overturned the honor system that dominated the Graeco-Roman and Jewish worlds, resulting in discrimination and exploitation of barbarians as well

> as in poisoning the relations between the congregations in Rome. The gospel offered grace to every group in equal measure, shattering the imperial premise of exceptionalism in virtue and honour.[33]

The social implications of the gospel are weaved throughout Romans but become particularly explicit in Romans 14:1 – 15:13.[34] In this passage Paul encourages believers – Jews and gentiles – to 'welcome' one another, and grounds his appeal on God's acceptance of believers in Christ (15:7). Mutual acceptance rules out 'discrimination' and 'judgement' (14:1-13) and so undermines the quest for honour found among ethnically diverse groups in Rome.[35] Since the Roman Empire and the imperial household were included within the honour-shame system of the ancient world, they too were challenged by the alternative community found among believers in Christ. For Jewett, Paul's attempt to create 'transformed relations' among Christians in Rome is a necessary precursor for taking the gospel to Spain.[36]

In addressing Romans 13:1-7, Jewett concedes that, possibly for missional reasons, Paul 'abandons the revolutionary approach to honor visible in the preceding chapters'.[37] And yet, Jewett can also characterise this text as a 'massive act of political co-optation'[38]: the God who grants the rulers the authority is the God embodied in the crucified Christ!

For Jewett, Paul's call for mutual welcome in the *ekklēsia* – and the challenges it posed to imperial society – are correlate with his criticism of human honour and pride, the 'boasting' of earlier chapters (Romans 2:17-24; 3:27-31; 4:1-2). Other approaches to the political Paul similarly stress the social ramifications of Paul's gospel.[39]

Questioning the political Paul

The three approaches surveyed above agree that Paul criticised or subverted the Roman Empire or emperor. The quest for the political Paul, however, has not been wholly accepted in recent scholarship and three key criticisms undermine its central claims.[40]

Firstly, advocates of the political Paul – and particularly those focusing on ideological conflict – make *questionable appeals to parallels* between the language applied to Jesus and that applied to the emperor.[41] Ironically, the identification of such parallels can be traced to a scholar who disavowed their political significance. In his celebrated *Light from the Ancient East*, Adolf Deissmann identified what he called a 'polemical parallelism' between the terms used by the early Christian movement and the imperial cult, drawing attention to words such as Lord (*kurios*), Christ (*christos*) and Gospel (*euangelion*).[42] Although such parallels led to *later* conflict between Christianity and the imperial cult, Deissmann argued that the 'lower class' constituency of early Christianity at the time of Paul made it unlikely that the early Christians were interested in changing the political structures of their world.[43]

Although Deissmann's conclusion on the social status of early believers has been widely criticised,[44] several scholars have noted the risk of finding parallels where none exist, as Seyoon Kim's recent critique of the political Paul contends.[45] The identification of parallels is notoriously subjective[46] and when the early Christian language most naturally has its roots within Jewish texts, the existence of true parallels to imperial ideology needs to be clearly demonstrated. As mentioned earlier, both Elliott and Wright adapt Hays' criteria for demonstrating Paul 'echoes' of the Jewish Scriptures to the imperial cult,[47] but there is a significant difference between identifying echoes in a set of texts recognised as authoritative by a community and finding echoes of an imperial ideology that was embedded within visual, textual and ritual media.

An example of the appeal to parallels is found in treatments of Paul's use of the term *euangelion* ('gospel'/'good news', cf. Romans 1:1, 16; 1 Corinthians 9:23; Galatians 2:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:4). Although connected to the verbal form *euangelizō* in the LXX version of Isaiah (Isaiah 52:7; 61:1-2, cf. *Psalms of Solomon* 11:1),[48] the term is also used within Roman imperial ideology, most famously in the Priene inscription that announced the 'good news' (*euangelia*) associated with the emperor Augustus.[49] Advocates of the political Paul claim that Paul's use deliberately undermined the imperial use, depicting the 'gospel' of the Roman Empire as a parody of the true gospel of Christ.[50]

Whether or not the early Christians drew the term *euangelion* from the imperial cult, there is no clear evidence that Paul opposed imperial ideology by his use of the term.[51] The only 'false gospels' that Paul names are those found within the *ekklēsia* (2 Corinthians 11:14; Galatians 1:6-7) and there is no explicit contrast in Paul between the 'gospel' of Jesus and the 'gospel' of the emperor. More fundamentally, the *euangelion* in Paul centred on the proclamation of the crucified and risen Christ

(1 Corinthians 15:3ff.)[52] and so differed markedly from that within imperial ideology. As Acts indicates, the early followers of Jesus were keen to show that the gospel entailed no revolt against Rome (Acts 25:8-11; 26:24-32; 28:30-31), a strategy followed by later Christians (1 *Clement* 60:4 – 61:1; *Martyrium of Polycarp* 10:2). In short, Paul's use of 'political terminology' (*euangelion*, *kurios*, *dikaiosunē*) falls far short of imperial subversion. As Christopher Bryan points out, 'Christians were using some of the same words about Jesus as pagans used about Caesar, but they were hardly using them in the same context, or meaning anything like the same thing by them.'[53]

The second criticism of constructs of the political Paul is that they *overplay the significance of political echoes in Pauline texts*. Often a subsidiary implication of a text is proclaimed as its key point, even though the argument of the text indicates that Paul's purpose lies elsewhere.[54] One fairly uncontroversial echo of imperial ideology in Paul's letters is found in 1 Thessalonians 5, where 'peace and security' (*eirēnē kai asphaleia*, verse 3) draws on a slogan extolling the benefits of living within the Roman Empire.[55] Alongside other elements in the text, Harrison argues that Paul's treatment of this slogan represents 'a radical subversion of Roman eschatological imagery and terminology'.[56] The use of this phrase, however, does not mean that Paul is critiquing the entire structure of empire, but simply indicates that the coming of Christ would undermine the assumption that peace and security could ultimately be granted by a human authority.[57] Such a contention would apply to any governing authority, not simply the Roman one. More significantly, the claim does not lead to a withdrawal from society or a critique of the state, but grounds Paul's appeal to avoid idleness (5:15) and to hold fast to what is good (5:21b).

A further example of possible over-interpretation is found in treatments of the 'hymn' in Philippians 2:6-11, a prime candidate for a 'political' critique of empire.[58] Oakes has made the strongest case yet for a critique of imperial ideology in this text, linking it to a contrast between Christ and the emperor in Philippians 3:20-21.[59] Despite the impressive parallels Oakes adduces, a range of other possible backgrounds has been suggested[60] and the most likely context remains the Hebrew Scriptures (including Isaiah 45:23). It is also significant that Paul refrains from making explicit any political critique from the hymn but rather focuses on encouraging believers to imitate the humility of Christ (2:5).[61]

Acknowledging that Paul's political critique is far from explicit, some suggest that Paul wrote a 'coded' critique to safeguard the congregations from Roman hostility.[62] Only when the critique is unveiled or 'decoded' does its political agenda becomes clear. Kim has highlighted the difficulty of this view, claiming it reveals a desperate attempt to explain the apparent absence of explicit anti-imperial texts.[63] A more sophisticated version of this approach appeals to 'hidden transcripts',[64] a notion developed by the sociologist J. C. Scott.[65] Whereas rulers can proclaim their politics in 'public transcripts' – public interactions between the rulers and the ruled – Scott argued that oppressed people act politically in much more subtle ways, such as through grumbling, folktales and popular carnivals.[66] These 'hidden transcripts' offer a criticism of oppressors and can be seen as forms of political resistance that act as a condition of material resistance.[67] Although his own research focused on political resistance in Malaysia, Scott suggests that 'traditional utopian beliefs', including forms of millennialism, can also be viewed as forms of popular resistance.[68]

Despite its helpful heuristic value, the application of Scott's model in the analysis of Paul's letters is questionable. Scott's research was based on a Malaysian context and applying it to the first century is problematic. We simply do not have the information available to know if Paul's letters contain the 'hidden transcripts' hypothesised by some interpreters.[69] Applying the work of Scott to Paul's letters begins with the assumption that Paul was hostile to empire, but that is exactly the question that needs to be addressed.

Thirdly, readings of the political Paul *re-interpret*, *downplay* or *ignore the counterevidence to their position*.[70] The clearest 'counterevidence' for a political Paul is, of course, Romans 13:1-7.[71] While all modern commentators would agree that this passage is no *carte blanche* legitimisation of state power, and draw attention to the need to balance it with other biblical perspectives, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this passage at the very least problematises some reconstructions of a political Paul.[72]

Advocates of the political Paul decentre the significance of this passage in a number of ways: detecting an implicit critique of governmental power in the text of Romans 13,[73] proposing a rhetorical ploy by Paul[74] or by noting that the broader context relativises Paul's teaching in Romans 13.[75]

While it is true that Romans 13:1-7 should not be considered the sum total of 'Paul's political theology', it does negate readings of Paul that depict him as anti-empire.[76] The passage clearly calls for believers to 'subordinate' themselves to governing authorities and grounds this appeal in God's providential establishment of authorities (13:2-3). Such a view is also consistent with a broadly Jewish approach to authority (Jeremiah 29:4-7; Daniel 5:18-19; Proverbs 8:15-16; Wisdom 6:1-11).[77]

A rather bolder attempt to decentre the significance of Romans 13:1-7 is found in T. L. Carter's argument that Paul's teaching here is deliberately 'ironic'.[78] Carter's case mainly rests on the tension between Paul's call to subordinate to the authorities and the reality of believers suffering under the same authorities, but – contra Carter – such a tension exists elsewhere (Luke 12:11-12; 1 Peter 2:13-14, 3:16-17) and is not sufficient to warrant an ironic reading of the passage.

Romans 13:1-7, however, is by no means the only counterevidence to constructions of a political Paul. Although arguments from silence are precarious, the lack of an explicit critique of empire within Paul is surprising if Paul did indeed intend to criticise the empire.[79] While he explicitly criticises pagan idolatry (Romans 1:18-25; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6; 10:14-22), he never draws explicit attention to the imperial cult. No doubt, the imperial cult is included – after all, it too was a form of pagan worship – but Paul prefers to issue generalised condemnations of the pagan world.[80] Even when a clear opportunity presented itself for critiquing empire, he did not take it.

Paul also advised the early believers to live in a way that would avoid hostility with the surrounding society, consistent with his avoidance of explicit critique of the governing authorities. Indeed, Romans 13:1-7 is couched within a broader paraenetical section that stresses harmony with neighbours (Romans 12:8; 13:8-10) and peace with persecutors (12:14, 17-21). Elsewhere, Paul encourages believers to 'live quietly' (1 Thessalonians 4:11) and to serve God in every walk of life (1 Corinthians 7:17). The broad tenor of Paul's social ethic makes it likely that he would have avoided confrontation with the imperial world.

Assessing the Political Paul

Several arguments associated with the quest for the political Paul have been undermined in recent scholarship and the bolder claims associated with the first approach described above are especially found wanting. There are, however, useful insights associated with research in this area. The final section of this article offers an assessment of the quest for the political Paul, highlighting both positive and negative features.

Firstly, *research on the political Paul offers an important reminder that religion and politics were closely connected in the ancient world.* In the Roman Empire, as in the ancient world generally, religion was deeply embedded within the political sphere. Cities in the Empire pursued the protection and blessing of the gods, with governing magistrates acting as religious functionaries.[81] Sacrifices and prayers were an important part of civic life, and regular festivals honoured the gods who protected the Empire and the cities.[82] Even those sceptical of the gods recognised the importance of piety in maintaining the cohesion of the Empire (Polybius 6.56.6). Religion and politics were related in ways difficult to imagine in today's post-Enlightenment world.

The significance of the Roman imperial cult – and Roman imperial ideology – has been a particular focus among advocates of the political Paul. Although its greatest influence was in the East, a close association was forged between the emperor and the gods throughout the Empire, including in Rome itself. Augustus played a key role in his process, with the famous *Res gestae* highlighting his religious as well as military achievements.[83] Key studies, such as Zanker and Fishwick,[84] have shaped research in this area, with a range of further works exploring the specific field of New Testament studies.[85] The quest for the political Paul has drawn attention to this area of study and the (re)turn to classical sources and archaeology is a welcome one. The quest for the political Paul is a potent reminder that early Christians had no choice but to reflect on how best to relate to the governing authorities that claimed the honours of God.

Secondly, *Paul minimised – rather than maximised – the tensions between gospel and empire.* The absence of overt criticism of the Roman Empire – even in contexts where we might expect it – argues against the view that Paul sought to undermine it. In fact, Paul encouraged believers to subordinate themselves to the governing authorities, asserting that God appointed the authorities to 'reward the good and punish the evil' (Romans 13:1-7). This is consistent with Paul's teaching elsewhere. Believers are to live quiet lives (1 Thessalonians

4:11) and love their neighbours (Romans 12:18). Paul focuses not on the enmity of empire but that of sin, Satan and death. His interest is in peace and order, not in revolt and conflict. For these reasons, Paul minimises potential conflict with the Roman Empire. In fact, recent research suggests that Paul and other early believers went even further, cultivating churches that sought the welfare of the cities where they dwelt.[86]

Although Elliott's recent work, *The Arrogance of Nations*, advocates a political reading of Romans, he explains that aspects of Paul's theology illustrate a 'voice under domination'. In particular, Romans 13:1-7 shows that Paul's radical vision for the gospel was subject to 'ideological constraints'.[87] This is a significant concession, as even for Elliott Paul's theology was not wholly critical of the empire. Romans 13:1-7 might even be seen as Paul's attempt to qualify the potentially subversive elements of his thought[88] and so negates the view that Paul was hostile to Roman power.

Thirdly, *the quest for the political Paul has identified significant points of tension between Paul's gospel and the Roman imperial world*. In particular, the identification of parallel patterns of theology and/or social practices within Paul's letters and the ideology of Roman rule reveals the *potential* conflict between the gospel and empire. To the extent that such tensions exist, Paul's theology can be seen as political. As Bryan also notes:

> Paul's proclamation is therefore 'political', in the same way in which... the entire biblical tradition is 'political', which is to say it asserts that there is One who is above all earthly powers, even within their own spheres, and who will hold them accountable.[89]

Such observations, however, do not mean that Paul *deliberately* critiqued Roman rule, but simply highlights the implicit tensions between the claims of the gospel and the claims of empire. Such tensions could – and, indeed, did – become 'conflicts' at a later stage, but Paul did not draw attention to these in writing his letters.[90]

One area where an implicit tension existed between Paul's gospel and the Roman Empire was, of course, in the claims advanced for Jesus and the emperor. Although attempts to show that Paul deliberately critiqued the emperor are subject to the criticisms identified above, there is no doubt that a commitment to Jesus *did* reshape the worldview of believers in such a way as to dethrone the significance of the emperor. As Oakes has argued, Paul places Christ at the centre of the believers' world and so inevitably *decentred* the emperor and his associated cult.[91] At a later stage, this led to cases where the confession of Jesus as Lord entailed political persecution. Even at later times, however, Christians sought to minimise their conflict with the Roman Empire.

Finally, *the future of the 'political Paul' is likely to be found in hermeneutical readings that explore the implicit conflict between Paul's gospel and empire*. Although Paul himself does not exploit this conflict, advocates of the political Paul have helpfully drawn attention to its implicit presence in his theology. Given the historical misuse of Romans 13:1-7, redressing the balance to show that Paul's theology is implicitly critical of aspects of empire, then and now, is a welcome development.

There are, of course, a number of hermeneutical strategies for retrieving the relevance of the political Paul. One approach prioritises the 'liberationist' aspects of Paul's theology and dismisses those themes that are unpalatable for such an agenda.[92] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, highlights the theme of 'equality' within Paul's letters and dismisses the patriarchal elements in Paul's theology.[93] Paul is treated as simply one voice in the *ekklēsia* and has no more or less authority than others. Similarly, Elliott's 'ideological critical' reading of Romans focuses on those aspects of Paul that are against empire while questioning the 'kyriarchal' theology that constrains his views.[94] Such approaches are increasingly common, but limit the canonical – and so theological – significance of Paul's witness.

A second approach is to explore the implications of Paul's theology for the political sphere, recognising that aspects of Paul's worldview can powerfully address new situations. Denny Burk rightly criticises advocates of the political Paul who fail to attend to the distinction between 'meaning' and 'implication' in their exegesis;[95] yet drawing attention to the implications of a text is a legitimate part of the broader hermeneutical enterprise.[96] Although the apostle Paul was scarcely 'anti-empire', the implicit logic of his gospel 'dethrones' the hidden logic of *some forms* of empire. When kept in balance with the witness of Scripture as a whole, exploring these tensions can allow Paul's voice to be heard today. Walsh and Keesmaat, for example, offer a 'midrashic' reading of Colossians in the light of globalisation and the postmodern world.[97] Although their exegetical claims are not always convincing, their fresh engagement with

the apostle Paul offers some helpful hermeneutical insights.

Conclusion

Research on the politics of Paul will no doubt continue to thrive, and appropriations of the exegetical findings advanced by its advocates are already impacting the broader theological world. There is, however, need for caution. Among the three 'streams' of research identified in this article, the position that Paul deliberately sought to undermine the empire – practically or ideologically – is negated by the absence of any explicit critique in Paul's theology and the presence of texts indicating a positive regard for empire, especially Romans 13:1-7. The other avenues of approach – that Paul's theology implicitly subverted imperial ideology or that Paul's view of the church challenged imperial society – have more to commend them, but err insofar as they depict this as a central focus of Paul's theology. Paul sought to minimise potential conflict with the Roman Empire, focusing instead on God's work in Christ, its implications for the communities of Christ-followers, and the coming consummation of God's kingdom.

Although the historical case for a 'political Paul' is weak, a hermeneutical retrieval of politically significant aspects of Paul's theology is appropriate. The position of the church, and the fundamental changes in the nature of government in a globalised context cry out for a sensitive and nuanced theology. Within Europe, such a theology also needs to take account of increasingly secular and 'post-Christian' societies.[98] Today as ever, the apostle Paul is a key resource in seeking scriptural wisdom for living with the powers that be.

Ed Mackenzie was Director of Undergraduate Studies at Birmingham Christian College, UK

Notes

1 An important collection of essays in this area, associated with the Society of Biblical Literature 'Paul and Politics' group, is R.A. Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation. Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000).

2 Tim Gorringe, 'Political Readings of Scripture' in J. Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 67-80; R.A. Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997). For an earlier work exploring the Bible and politics, see R. Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (Third Way Books; London: SPCK, 1989; second ed. London: SPCK, 2010).

3 Justin Meggitt, 'Taking the Emperor's Clothes Seriously: The New Testament and the Roman Empire' in C.E. Joynes (ed.), *The Quest for Wisdom: Essays in Honour of Philip Budd* (Cambridge: Orchard Academic, 2002) 143-169; W. Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Abingdon Essential Guides; Nashville: Abingdon, 2006); R.A. Horsley (ed.), *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008). For a series of articles exploring the New Testament and the imperial cult, see *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27.3 (2005).

4 See L. Linafelt (ed.), *A Shadow of Glory: Reading the New Testament After the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

5 Winsome Munro, 'Romans 13:1-7: Apartheid's Last Biblical Refuge' in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 20 (1990) 161-168, esp. 161-164.

6 For an explicit attempt to appropriate Paul as a critic of American power, see N. Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Paul in Critical Contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008); for a critical review of the same, see my review in *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 16.3 (2009) 340-342.

7 For a similar survey offering a critique of the movement, see Denny Burk, 'Is Paul's Gospel Counter-imperial? Evaluating the Prospects of the "Fresh Perspective" for Evangelical Theology', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51 (2008) 309-327. Unlike the following survey, Burk groups 'political readings' of Paul together.

8 N. Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

9 Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 25-54.

10 For a criticism of Elliott's dismissal of 'deutero-Paulines' by a scholar supportive of the 'political Paul' quest, see N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 18-19.

11 Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 25-81.

12 Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 93-139.

13 Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 143-149.

14 Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 181-214.

15 Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 191.

16 Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, 214-226.

17 Elliott, *Arrogance*, 50-57.

18 'the argument of Romans as a whole collides *inescapably* with the claims of empire, even if that collision is never expressed in explicit terms', *Arrogance*, 14.

19 Hays' criteria for intertextual echoes include the fol-

lowing: availability, historical plausibility, volume, history of interpretation, recurrence, thematic coherence and satisfaction. Elliott, *Arrogance*, 43; cf. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 29-32.

20 K. Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1987); J.R. Harrison, 'Paul, Eschatology and the Augustan Era of Grace', *Tyndale Bulletin* 50.1 (1999) 71-91; idem, 'Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 25 (2002) 71-96; D. Georgi, *Theocracy in Paul's Praxis and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); J.D. Crossan and J. L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* (London: SPCK, 2004).

21 For N. T. Wright's understanding of the theology of Paul, see his *Fresh Perspective* and the collection of essays in *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). See also T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity* (London: Lion, 1997). For Wright's political reading of Paul, see especially 'Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire' in *Paul and Politics*,160-183.

22 Wright, *Saint Paul*, 79-80, 88; 'Paul and Caesar: A New Reading of Romans' in C. Bartholomew et al. (eds.), *A Royal Priesthood: The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically. A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan* (Scripture and Hermeneutics Series; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 177-180.

23 Wright 'Paul's Gospel', 164.

24 N.T. Wright, 'The Letter to the Romans', in L. E. Keck (ed.), *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 10* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 395-770, here 398.

25 Wright's exposition of Romans is found in his extended commentary 'Letter to the Romans'; his specific treatment of gospel peace versus imperial peace is on 515-516. For a brief overview of Wright's political reading of the letter, see Wright, 'Paul's Gospel', 170-174.

26 'Romans 13 constitutes a severe demotion of arrogant and self-divinizing rulers. It is an undermining of totalitarianism, not a reinforcement of it', Wright, 'Letter to the Romans', 719.

27 Wright, 'Paul's Gospel', 182.

28 Wright, 'Paul's Gospel', 173-181.

29 Wright, *Saint Paul*, 59-79.

30 P. Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 129-174; Harry O. Maier, 'A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27 (2005) 323-349.

31 Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007). See also his concise overview, 'Romans' in J. D. G. Dunn (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 91-104, and his summary of the occasion of Romans in 'Ecumenical Theology for the Sake of Mission: Romans 1:1-7 + 15:14-16:24' in D. M. Hay & E. E. Johnson (eds.), *Pauline Theology, Vol. III: Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 89-108.

32 Jewett, *Romans*, 48-49. See also Robert Jewett, 'Response: Exegetical Support from Roman and Other Letters' in *Paul and Politics*, 58-71.

33 Jewett, *Romans*, 1.

34 Jewett, *Romans*, 829-899.

35 Jewett, *Romans*, 889-890.

36 Jewett, 'Romans', 104.

37 Jewett, *Romans*, 803.

38 Jewett, *Romans*, 790.

39 R.A. Horsley, 'Rhetoric and Empire – and 1 Corinthians', in *Paul and Politics*, 72-109; Sze-Kar Wan, 'Collections for the Saints as Anticolonial Act: Implications of Paul's Ethnic Reconstruction' in *Paul and Politics*, 40-57.

40 For three important critiques of the political Paul, and the key sources for several of the following criticisms, see C. Bryan, *Render to Caesar: Jesus, the Early Church, and the Roman Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 77-93; S. Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 1-71; Burk, 'Counterimperial', 309-327.

41 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, 90-91; Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 28-30; Burk, 'Counterimperial', 315-319.

42 A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World* (rev. ed., London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1927) 338-377.

43 Deissmann, *Light*, 339.

44 For a widely influential description of the social level of early Christians, see W.A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983) 51-73, and the summary in B. Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 90-103. For a critique of recent views, see J.J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival* (Studies of the NT and its World; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 75-154.

45 Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 28-30.

46 The classic article on the misuse of parallels remains S. Sandmel, 'Parallelomania', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962) 1-13. Sandmel explores the misuse or rabbinic parallels to NT texts, but his criticism of the 'extravagant use' of parallels among New Testament scholars is pertinent here.

47 See note 18 above; Wright, *Fresh Perspective*, 61-62; Elliot, *Arrogance of Nations*, 43.

48 J.A. Fitzmyer, 'The Gospel in the Theology of Paul' in *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 150-159, esp. 158-160; J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 166-169. Note especially Paul's citation of Isaiah 52:7 (LXX) in Romans 10:16.

49 Deissmann, *Light*, 366. Graham Stanton claims that the use in the imperial cult probably forms the background for the term in Paul, see G.N. Stanton, 'Paul's gospel' in *Cambridge Companion*, 173-184, esp. 173-174. See, however, Dunn's objections to this view, *Theology*, 166-168.

50 See especially N.T. Wright, 'Gospel and Theology in Galatians' in L. A. Jervis and P. Richardson (eds.), *Gospel in Paul: Studies in Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker* (JSNT Supp; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 222-239. See also Horsley, 'Rhetoric and Empire', 91-92; Wright, 'Gospel and Empire', 164-165; 'Letter to the Romans', 415-416.

51 Fitzmyer, 'Gospel', 158-160.

52 E. P. Sanders notes that 'the main theme of Paul's gospel was the saving action of God in Jesus Christ and how his hearers could participate in that action', *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977) 447. See also Hays' summary of the 'grammar' of Paul's gospel narrative in 'Is Paul's Gospel Narratable?', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27 (2004) 217-239.

53 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, 91.

54 Burk, 'Counterimperial', 319-322.

55 For Roman inscriptions illustrating the theme see B. Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 146-147.

56 Harrison, 'Paul and the Imperial gospel', 92.

57 Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 30.

58 Oakes, *Philippians*, 147-174; Wright, 'Paul's Gospel', 174. See also the argument of R. J. Cassidy, who detects a shift in Paul's approach to Empire from 'accommodation' in Romans to 'resistance' in Philippians: *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), esp. 163-210.

59 For Oakes' argument, see *Philippians*, 147-174. Note, however, his slightly different approach to this passage in his 'Re-mapping the Universe: Paul and the Emperor in 1 Thessalonians and Philippians,' *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27 (2005) 301-322, esp. 318-321.

60 For an overview of possible backgrounds, see P.T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 193-198.

61 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, 85-87.

62 Wright, 'Paul's Gospel,' 173-181.

63 Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 32-33.

64 N. Elliott, 'Strategies of Resistance and Hidden Transcripts in the Pauline Communities' in R. A. Horsley (ed.), *Hidden Transcripts and Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul* (SBL Semeia Series; Atlanta: SBL, 2004) 97-122.

65 J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

66 Scott, *Domination*, 136-182.

67 Scott, *Domination*, 191.

68 Scott, *Domination*, 81.

69 On this point, see Bryan, *Christ and Caesar*, 32-33; C.K. Briggs, 'Reconstructing "Resistance" or Reading to Resist: James C. Scott and the Politics of Interpretation,' in *Hidden Transcripts*, 146-148.

70 Kim identifies a total of nine distinct factors that make an anti-imperial reading of Paul difficult, *Christ and Caesar*, 34-64.

71 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, 78-82; Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 36-43; Burk, 'Counterimperial', 330-335.

72 Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 36-43.

73 Jewett, *Romans*, 790; Wright, 'Letter to the Romans', 715-723. See also the older attempt – ultimately going back to Origen – to detect a reference to 'spiritual' powers as part of the 'authorities' (*exousiai*) of Rom 13:1 in O. Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1957) 62-70.

74 Elliott, *Liberating*, 214-226.

75 Others have attempted to treat Romans 13:1-7 as an interpolation, such as J.C. O'Neill, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London: Penguin, 1975) 207-209. This strategy, however, has been widely and rightly rejected.

76 Elliott concedes the point, noting that in Romans 13:1-7 'we are in touch here with the constraining force of ideology, with "voice under domination"', *Arrogance of Nations*, 156.

77 For an account of Israel's view of Empire, see Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, 11-24.

78 T.L. Carter, 'The Irony of Romans 13', *Novum Testamentum* 46 (2004) 209-228.

79 Kim, Christ and Caesar, 34-36.

80 Burk, 'Counterimperial', 326-327.

81 M. Beard, J. North and S. Price, *Religions of Rome, Vol. 1: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 43-48. For an overview of the broader context, see R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).

82 See Beard, *Religions*, 48-54; P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988) 114-118.

83 For the text of the *Res gestae*, see K. Chilsholm and J. Ferguson (eds.), *Rome: The Augustan Age. A Source Book* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1981) 3-10.

84 Zanker, *Power of Images*; D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies of the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1987-1992).

85 For helpful surveys, see David W. J. Gill, 'The Roman

Empire as a Context for the New Testament', in S. E. Porter (ed.), *A Handbook to the Exegesis of the New Testament* (Boston: Brill, 2002) 389-406. For further references, see footnote 3 above.

86 B.W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

87 Elliott, *Arrogance of Nations*, 50-57.

88 In support of this view of Romans 13, see my (unpublished) Doctoral thesis awarded by the University of Edinburgh, *The State and the Community of God: Political Themes in Romans and the Occasion of Romans 13:1-7* (2003).

89 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, 92.

90 It is significant that later Christian writers also sought to minimise their conflict with the Roman Empire. For a helpful source book of later responses and an exploration of reasons for the Roman persecutions, see R.M. Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire: Background Texts* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2001). See also the helpful discussion on 'the boundaries of Roman Religion' in Beard, *Religions*, 211-244, esp. 225-227.

91 Oakes, 'Re-mapping', 301-322.

92 This approach is explicitly identified as part of the SBL 'Paul and Politics' group's aims: R.A. Horsley, 'Introduction' in *Paul and Politics*, 15.

93 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Paul and the Politics of Interpretation' in *Paul and Politics*, 40-57.

94 Elliott, *Arrogance*, 91-57, 163-166.

95 Burk, 'Counterimperial', 319-322.

96 For an introductory discussion, see J.K Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 100-119.

97 B.J. Walsh and S.C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004).

98 See especially S. Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).