Introduction to *Roman Imperial Texts: A Sourcebook*

This is a sourcebook of Roman texts for readers of the New Testament. It is a supplement to one's reading of the New Testament, a tool to prompt consideration of how its texts relate to the Roman Empire and how the Christianities that grew out of the communities behind those texts came to relate to the state. A look at the texts and images from the Roman Principate that are roughly contemporary with the New Testament allows one to understand with more precision how these texts present Jesus as God's Son, who brought good news for humanity, what functions the early churches reflected in the New Testament fulfilled and what challenges they experienced, and how the early Christians, as seen in the book of Revelation, experienced the expanding and tightening hold of Rome on their lives.

Part 1 of this book is primarily focused on the Gospels. Part 2 is primarily focused on the book of Acts and the letters of the New Testament—those written by Paul and those by others. Part 3 of the book is primarily focused on the book of Revelation. Readers seeking an efficient way to use this book might best begin with the section that covers the part of the New Testament on which they are focusing, though texts from throughout the New Testament are cited in each of the three parts below. New Testament texts appear in boldface in order for readers to find them easily, and this volume is indexed by Scripture, Roman sources, topics, and authors, in order that readers might gain access as quickly as possible to material most useful for them.

The texts and images in this sourcebook come from the reigns of the emperors from Augustus to Hadrian (27 bce–138 ce). All New Testament scholars, even those who date Luke and Acts in the second century, would agree that by the death of Hadrian, most of the New Testament had been written. Some might date the Pastoral Letters later, but most would consider them to have been composed by 138 ce. So the collection in this sourcebook makes an attempt to provide texts and images roughly contemporary with the New Testament texts, from the period that we call the early Principate, a time period we shall consider in more detail at the beginning of Part 1.

Some interpretation is of course involved in the selection of texts and images in a sourcebook for New Testament readers. But I have made an effort not to articulate a specific relationship between a given New Testament text or author and the Roman texts or images found here. New Testament texts are aligned with Roman texts and images, but no assumption is made regarding whether the New Testament text is subverting or endorsing specific ideas found in the Roman texts. In this regard, Geza Vermes's caution regarding how much one's reconstruction of a background can be formed to fit a preconceived reading or an imagined foreground for a text must be remembered in our reading of these Roman texts and images.[1] These texts and images must be viewed as resources for a more complete context in our reading of the New Testament, not as focused evidence for a particular application of the canonical texts.

The suggestion that New Testament readers look to the Roman Empire is not new. Adolf Deissmann's *Light from the Ancient East* and his *Bible Studies* looked explicitly to Hellenistic and Roman parallels to understand the language of the New Testament, as well as the Septuagint.[2] Today in New Testament scholarship, those who look to Roman parallels often do so as part of a political reading of the text. They assume that the New Testament texts are intentionally subverting the Roman Empire's claims over the world.[3]

The look to the Roman Empire is not a strategy unanimously valued among New Testament scholars, and therefore this sourcebook may be considered tendentious by some. John Barclay's essay "Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul" makes the case that Paul did not oppose the Roman Empire as such.[4] Barclay, who therefore sees no point in looking expressly for

1. Geza Vermes, "Jewish Studies and New Testament Interpretation," in *Jesus and the World of Judaism*, ed. Geza Vermes (London: SCM, 1983), 58–73.

2. G. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, trans. L. R. M. Strachan (German edition of 1922; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1927); Deissmann, *Bible Studies: Contributions Chiefly from Papyri and Inscriptions to the History of the Language, the Literature, and the Religion of Hellenistic Judaism and Primitive Christianity*, trans. Alexander Grieve (German editions of 1895 [*Bibelstudien*] and 1897 [*Neue Bibelstudien*]; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1901).

3. N. T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, imperium, interpretation*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 160–83; John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004); Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008); Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001); Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006); Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006).

anti-imperial texts in Paul, argues that Paul's understanding of categories like the elemental powers of the world might include some aspects of the Roman Empire, but are much bigger than it was. He also understands Paul's Letters as written explicitly to Christians, to be read in private assemblies; in contexts, that is, where Paul had no need to disguise his meaning through oblique references in order to keep himself or his congregations safe. Because they are private documents, Barclay finds no evidence in them of what James C. Scott has called "hidden transcripts."[5] Barclay therefore finds it noteworthy that Paul says so little about the Roman emperor or other explicitly Roman ideas. But this argument from silence needs to be considered in light of the phenomena that Paul usually does not name or directly mention opponents or people who are otherwise causing him problems. For example, all agree that Paul has specific people in mind in 2 Cor. 2:5-8; 11:12-15, though he does not name them. In an analogous way, Paul may have Roman authorities in mind in 1 Thess. 5:3, since here he quotes a slogan of the Roman Principate. And as a letter writer, Paul does not always explicitly state the major ideas that seem to be motivating his discourse. The texts of Rom. 1:13; 9:1-3; and Philem. 21 leave unidentified the significant ideas of "fruit" among the Romans, the basis of Paul's grief over his fellow Jews, and what more he wants Philemon to do. If Paul can be enigmatic when referring to people who bother him or when describing his plans or his own grief, the supposed silence regarding Rome may not prove its insignificance to Paul. Authors do not mention those from whom they are trying to differ, as Harold Bloom shows so well.[6]

Barclay admits that the diction of the New Testament includes terms that could be used in the propaganda of imperial Rome. But Barclay is reacting against the insistence by authors such as Richard A. Horsley and N. T. Wright that in certain New Testament texts, the human author is intentionally focusing the discourse specifically on the Roman Empire. In this context, Barclay's caution remains a helpful reminder not to claim too much for any reconstruction of authorial intention. As for Barclay's insistence that Paul's Letters are private documents and thus would not carry hidden transcripts embedded within them, we might simply observe that Paul had very little

4. John M. G. Barclay, "Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul," in *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Judaism*, ed. John M. G. Barclay, WUNT 1/275 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 363–87, especially 383–85.

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

6. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

control over who might read his letters after they were dispatched, especially if he knew at the time of composition that they would be read at different house churches (Rom. 16:3–5, 10–11) and if he or his associates encouraged the letters to be exchanged with other churches (Col. 4:16). Besides the question of Paul's Letters, in a sourcebook like this we also seek a context for the narrative and apocalyptic material of the New Testament, whose original audiences seem even more difficult to delimit than the congregations that received Paul's Letters.

Barclay's insistence that the "point of conflict" evident in Paul's Letters is between Paul and the polytheistic fabric of the Mediterranean world, rather than specifically with the Roman Empire, is a much-needed emphasis.[7] The elemental powers that oppress the world certainly include more than Rome (Gal. 4:9; Col. 2:15). The designated thesaurus for this sourcebook, the Roman Principate, must therefore not be mistaken to be the only political or religious context through which the New Testament should be read. The New Testament records the life of Jesus and the founding of the early church, events that occurred while the Roman Empire ruled the Mediterranean. Decades later, when the texts that now compose our New Testament were written, this empire was still in power. But the contexts of Jewish culture, the Jewish Scriptures, and locally specific cultures throughout the Mediterranean world are also significant for any reading of the New Testament.

Still, the fact remains that the Roman Empire found something wrong with Paul, even if he did not oppose the Roman Empire as directly as N. T. Wright suggests. So if we follow Barclay in his claim that Paul is not intentionally subverting the Roman Empire in his letters, we are still left with a relationship of incompatibility between Paul the apostle to the nations and the Roman Empire. There is, therefore, some utility in a book that offers parallels between Roman texts and images from the Principate and New Testament texts. This sort of presentation at least allows one to read the New Testament in a new way, and it encourages one to think through how its texts are directly opposing (á la Deissmann or Wright) or ignoring (á la Barclay) the Roman Empire.

This book does not proceed on the basis of any reconstruction of authorial intention in New Testament texts with regard to the Roman Empire. It will thus be useful for someone who is influenced by writers like Wright or Crossan and Reed, who view an author like Paul as directly making a frontal attack on the Roman Empire in his letters. It will be equally useful for someone who is influenced by a point of view like Barclay's. For either of these positions, so

7. John M. G. Barclay, "Paul, Roman Religion and the Emperor: Mapping the Point of Conflict," in Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Judaism*, 359, 361.

different in regard to reconstructing Paul's conscious relation to Rome and yet so similar in attempting to argue for authorial intention, this book provides texts and images that might have analogous resonance with ideas in the New Testament. The reader is thus offered resources and stimuli for thinking and articulating the ways in which the New Testament frame of reference includes or omits Rome, in order to understand the New Testament better.

This book will also be useful for those who seek to understand the historical phenomenon of Christianity. It is no secret that by the fourth century of the Common Era, the universal vision of the Roman Republic and Empire had been co-opted by Christianity.[8] The book therefore provides opportunities for reflection on how the New Testament, whether its authors bought into the Principate's categories or not, provided a frame of reference that allowed that to happen within just four centuries.

Primary texts allow us to escape the confining perspectives of our current moment. Yes, this sourcebook is responding to the current interest in the political dimensions of the New Testament. Yes, the selection of texts and images arises out of my idea that some of them are ideologically analogous to what we encounter in the New Testament. But no assumption is made that all of the parallels are analogous, and I leave it to each reader to decide if the parallels offered illuminate the New Testament texts in helpful ways. If some of the texts and images in the pages that follow are new to some readers, then these texts and images provide new windows onto the New Testament texts with the efficiency and freshness that only voices from outside our own world can provide. Readers will inevitably disagree regarding the relevance of one or more of these primary texts and images as supplements for New Testament readers. But even if selected primary texts or images do not prove a particular relationship between the New Testament and the worlds behind the text, such primary documents are useful for helping readers to discover a new world.[9] It remains for us to take and read these primary texts and images, in order that we might become more comprehensive and thoughtful readers of the New Testament.

8. Henry Chadwick, "Christian and Roman Universalism in the Fourth Century," in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity, Essays in Tribute to George Christopher Stead*, ed. Lionel R. Wickham and Caroline P. Bammel, SuppVC 19 (Leiden: Brill 1993), 26–42.

9. Arnoldo Momigliano, "What Josephus Did Not See," in *Pagans, Jews and Christians* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 108–19.