

**Resisting, negotiating and imitating the empire:  
the complexities of empire as context for early Christians**

*Pieter JJ Botha*

Department of New Testament & Early Christian Studies  
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

*Abstract*

In recent years, empire has become a major field of research among New Testament scholars. In this article, after a brief review of two of the major exponents, I raise a number of critical issues. I make the point that early Christianities were not only caught in the web of Roman power, but eventually also adopted and developed imperial practices themselves. This means that empire must be central to exegetical and hermeneutical efforts.

**Introduction**

The growth of interest in *empire* – not only as the context of the New Testament, but also as generative of a discursive space in which to do hermeneutics – must be considered as one of the more significant developments in recent biblical scholarship. Biblical scholars' increased interest in empire reflects current concerns in related fields of research, especially those of the humanities: in short, empire is very much “back in fashion” (Motyl 2001:1).

More than just a fashionable intellectual fad is at stake here; it has become clear that the socio-political context of institutions and persons today (and of scholarship) is considered by many critics as imperial, a setting that evokes very different renderings, some accommodating of empire, others resisting it.

South African scholars are also contributing to this debate (e.g. Punt 2002; 2010a; 2010b; Strijdom 2010). In a perceptive study on Afrikaner Christianity, Erna Oliver points out that the “Christian faith can no longer be subjected to structures that focus on social order and hierarchy” (Oliver 2010:6). This obviously raises questions about social order and hierarchy in the foundational documents of Christianity (the New Testament) and in the formative events of Christianity (the historical Jesus and the ensuing Jesus movement). The early Christians were quite aware of the Roman empire; one among them described it as “a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and

seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads” (Revelation 13.1).<sup>1</sup> However, the speed and zeal with which Christendom accepted the task of ruling, of adopting and managing the public and political institutions of the empire is a disturbing fact (Botha 2004). A number of studies by New Testament scholars are well worth considering in this regard; the work of two stands out.

### **New Testament scholarship and empire**

#### *The renewal of Israel in the shadow of empire: Richard Horsley*

In 1979, two articles appeared on the notorious bandits that plagued Galilee in the first century and on the role of the *sicarii*, the “dagger men”,<sup>2</sup> in the conflicts in Judaea before the War. In these two studies, Richard Horsley (1979a; 1979b) brought together two interests that would determine his work for the next three decades: (1) The peasantry played a far greater role in first-century Jewish social history than was allowed for until then. New Testament scholars and other historians of the period typically ignored the ninety per cent of the population, the peasants, and concentrated instead on the ideas and beliefs of literate groups within Judaism. (2) Horsley also explored the use of socio-political models and comparative material from other periods and societies to illuminate and interpret the historical evidence from first-century Palestine.

Rather than simply taking Josephus’ propagandistic depiction at face value, Horsley argues that the tyrannical and exploitative circumstances of the time need to be considered in their stark actual reality. In other words, those first-century texts have to be read in the context of an *empire*.

These two articles were followed by a number of investigations into the socio-religious roles and concrete movements at the time of Jesus; Bible texts are not just religious artefacts but have to be read in their full, proper social, economic and political context to be meaningful on their own terms. This “re-describing” culminated in three significant monographs (Horsley 1993a; 1989a; Horsley and Hanson 1985). Horsley shows that Jesus did not

<sup>1</sup> Actually, the precise identity of the “beast” is still debated; some scholars argue the seer’s critique is of “political messianism” (Van de Water 2000). This problem does not essentially change the point (of John’s vision), because the beast clearly presents imperialism irrespective of *whose* imperialist drive or *when* its full force will be revealed.

<sup>2</sup> Horsley’s phrase (2003a:83); a *sica* is a curved dagger and a *sicarius* a hit man. Goodman (2007:407) writes of the *sicarii* as a new species of bandit, practising terrorism within Jewish society. The interpretation of Josephus *BJ* 2.425, 433–456 (our informant about the *sicarii*) is a complex issue: Isaac 1984; Grabbe 1992:500–501; Millar 1993:362–363. Brighton (2009) concludes that, from a historical perspective, “sicarii” was a somewhat fluid term used to describe Jews of the Judean revolt who were associated with acts of violence against their own people for religious/ political ends.

simply oppose violence (i.e. the gentle, romantic Jesus “as a sober prophet of pacifist love of one’s enemies” (Horsley, et al. 1985:xiv) so preferred by traditional scholarship), but opposed injustice and exploitation. Jesus actively identified with the “implicit” religion of the Galilean peasantry, and strove to establish God’s rule. According to Horsley (1986), the injunction “love your enemies” pertains neither to external, political enemies nor to the question of non-violence or non-resistance.

In Horsley’s historical perspective, Israel originated as a “free peasantry” in covenant with God, and the struggle between peasantry and ruling elites, domestic and foreign, became a central element in her subsequent history. The memory of Israel’s origins functioned as an ideal in both her Scripture and popular tradition and (adding to the tensions marking any two-class social structure) created an ethos which easily sparked peasant movements.

This awareness of the implications of taking the peasants within the Roman empire seriously was heightened by an important study on Christmas (Horsley 1989a) and an investigation into the social structures in first-century Palestine (Horsley 1989b). Horsley’s depiction of the social situation is informed by studies of pre-industrial peasant societies and the social dynamics operating between rural peasants and urban, ruling elites. His intention is to suggest a more concrete picture of first-century Jewish Palestine. It was a colonial situation of class struggle and conflict between economically oppressive urban, ruling elites and economically oppressed rural peasants (perhaps 90% of the population). It is this social situation which generated a variety of social bandits and popular prophets, and the spiral of violence: institutional violence brought about protest which, in turn, led to counter-repression and then to revolt.

Horsley (1993b) argues that people subjected to foreign imperial rule mount serious resistance by renewing their own traditional way of life. According to Horsley, Jesus led a prophetic movement to renew Israel among the Galilean and other villagers, and revitalised the traditional Mosaic covenantal principles of communal mutuality and justice, in resistance to oppressive Roman imperial rule.

The kingdom of God in Jesus’ preaching and practice, as an assertion of divine rule, “was concerned with persons, individually and socially. The kingdom meant wholeness of life ... a society, a people, ... not a place or a realm” (Horsley 1993a:324).

More particularly, the renewal of the life of the people meant renewal of the fundamental social-political form of traditional peasant life, the village. Within the local communities, however, in an apparent break with the traditional patriarchal forms that had either broken down or become oppressive, Jesus

called for new "familial" but egalitarian relations. He also insisted on an egalitarian principle in relations going beyond the local community as well – relations with no authority figures. (Horsley 1993a:324)

In his work, Horsley develops a (historical) picture of Jesus as a preacher who counselled peasants toward a social revolution in which cooperation would replace the current hierarchy of contemporary society. Jesus was a social revolutionary involved with the peasant population of (mostly) Galilee. Standing in the covenantal-prophetic tradition of Israel, Jesus took the side of the poor and indicted the ruling elites. He threatened the temple, the symbolic as well as economic centre of the Jewish social world, and criticised the high-priestly establishment who had made the temple "an instrument of imperial legitimation and control of a subjected people" (Horsley 1993a:287, cf. 285–306).

This is a Jesus in marked contrast to, for example, Ed Sanders's (1985) description where Jesus is remarkably unconcerned with his social world. It is also different from Burton Mack's Jesus – the teacher, a clever, and often playful ridiculer of the preoccupations that animate and imprison people, with only incidental social critique. According to Mack (1988), Jesus was a gadfly or mocker, a man who dined in private homes with small groups of people. Horsley's understanding of the historical Jesus is more like Marcus Borg's, and the conflict in the Jesus traditions shows a picture of Jesus as a man who was more political than the figure we are accustomed to (cf. Borg 1987; 1991).

Horsley stresses the necessity of locating Jesus firmly within the context of first-century Jewish Palestine. However, he understands that context in materialist rather than idealist terms. That is, the context is not a set of ideas (about the Messiah, the temple, restoration eschatology, the law, etc.), but the concrete social situation of struggling to make a living in an exploitative (imperialist) society. Accordingly, in Jesus' context, the traditions about "loving one's enemy" refer to relationships of solidarity within the community (Horsley 1993a:255–273).

During the 1990s Horsley (1995c; 1996b; 1999) embarked on an intensive study of the history of first-century Galilee and Judaea, extending his scope to include archaeology (Horsley 1994a; 1995b; 1995a; 1996a). He maintains that, without a clear understanding of the political-economic conditions of the time, we are unable to grasp the setting and message of the Jesus movements and rabbinic traditions that developed in Galilee. More specifically, Horsley's aim is to explain how the "ordinary people" of Galilee would have lived. The determining part of their lives was the set of conflicts that arose during the Roman period: (1) the historical conflicts between the "Judeans" (Jerusalem) and the "Israelites" (Galilee); (2) the social and eco-

conomic conflicts between the cities and villages; (3) the distinctions between upper and lower Galilee; and (4) the relationship of the Roman imperial forces to the indigenous people.

To Horsley the relationship between the cities and the villages was not a mutually beneficial one based on a trade system that resulted from the growth of the large market (urban) centres. Instead, as an agrarian society, the Galilean villagers found the cities to be an economic burden. The cities were sources of oppressive tax, tribute, and tithe systems that threatened the traditional life of the villagers. According to Horsley (1996a:87),<sup>3</sup> this conflict between the villages and cities is the key to understanding both Jesus and the rabbis.

In a very readable review of the “revolution” the early Jesus movement brought to the first-century Mediterranean world, Horsley collaborated with Neil Asherman (a historian of antiquity) to deal with the following question: what influence did political circumstances in the early imperial age have on the development of Christianity as an independent religion? Again, the emphasis is on the ruled, and not the rulers: “History has almost always been written from the viewpoint of those who build cities and conquer empires, but in the New Testament and the early Christian tradition we may be able to catch a rare glimpse at the hopes, dreams, and Utopian visions of those who suddenly find themselves at the bottom of a new civilization’s social heap” (Horsley and Silberman 1997:5).

Horsley and Silberman (1997) take up the transformation of Paul from persecutor of the church to apostle to the Gentiles caught up in the renewal of Israel as apocalyptic champion of an alternative social order. Paul’s feverish mission activities must be understood with a provocative anti-imperial and apocalyptic thrust: Paul was insisting upon an “empire” on other terms. Horsley and Silberman make their message explicit:

those who today fancy themselves to be faithful followers of Jesus should be constantly reminded of the painful struggle of the saints against Caesar in which the Christian faith was born. Christianity’s historic origins do not lie in an abstract concern with isolated issues of individual ethics but in a dedication to

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<sup>3</sup> Although detailed historical interpretation is not within the scope of this article, it should be pointed out that two central contentions of Horsley are questioned on archaeological grounds: (1) the claim of a continuous Israelite population in Galilee; and (2) the consistently negative depiction of the economic relationship between the urban and rural settings in Galilee as destructive for the villagers. Galilee suffered considerable depopulation after the monarchy, and the settlements in Galilee during the Persian period were depended upon the Phoenician cities on and near the Mediterranean coast (Gal 1992:106-110; 1998; Zwickel 2007). Furthermore, studies of the pottery trade in Roman Galilee reveal a vigorous and widespread interaction between Galilean communities (Adan-Bayewitz and Perlman 1990; Adan-Bayewitz, Aviam and Edwards 1995).

resist the idolatry of power embodied by the Roman Empire (Horsley et al. 1997:231–232).

Paul and empire is the theme that has kept Horsley busy since the late 1990s. He explains his particular emphasis in Pauline studies: “Christianity was a product of empire. In one of the great ironies of history, what became the established religion of empire started as an anti-imperial movement” (Horsley 1997b:1). Paul, anticipating the termination of this evil age at the parousia of Christ, was energetically establishing Christian communities ἐκκλησίαι (a primarily political term, the citizens’ assembly of the Greek *polis*) as alternatives to the official “assemblies” of the cities of the Roman empire. Horsley points out that the concept of “religion” as a distinctive entity emerged in eighteenth-century Western European culture, so that the separation of church and state, with designated jurisdictions, was unthinkable in antiquity.<sup>4</sup> That is why “Christian theology and biblical studies, focused primarily on religious affairs, tended to lose sight of the political and economic dimensions of life with which the Bible is concerned” (Horsley 1997b:1).

As with his study of the historical Jesus, Horsley is adamant that the “proper” opposition to the Pauline movement be identified. In Galilee and Jerusalem Jesus did not battle the Zealots or the violent *sicarii*; he was opposed to exploitation and imperial ideology. In contrast to the overly simple previous dichotomy between revolt and quiescence as the principal political options for Jesus, it may be possible to discern a range of forms in popular political-religious resistance on the basis of comparative studies of peasant politics (Horsley 2010).

Similarly, “the background and significance of many of the most basic Pauline terms and symbols ... [should be understood] over against Roman imperial religio-politics, not over against ‘Judaism’” (Horsley 1997b:3). However vague Paul

was about social forms in the “kingdom of God” which was presumably coming at the “day of the Lord” and (the completion of) the resurrection, in his mission Paul was building an international alternative society (the “assembly”) based on local egalitarian communities (“assemblies”) (Horsley 1997b:8; 1997a:244–252).

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<sup>4</sup> Horsley here refers to McGrane (1989:55–61), but elaborates on the issue elsewhere (Horsley 2003b; 2003c; 2003a:8–9, 11–25). Although he emphasises that one should *not separate* religion and politics when discussing ancient societies, Horsley does not address the *religiousness* of ancient religion. It is difficult to make sense of his use of the concept religion: does he mean a large social identity, or a series of beliefs, or the fellowship around a religious teacher, or the idea of moral order, or the “self-evident” overlap of (some) of these meanings?

Characterising Horsley's reading of the New Testament, we can use the word *village* rather than "empire". The "alternative society", to Horsley, is like the ideal village, specifically a village "without resort to official institutions such as the area courts" (Horsley 1993a:324).

The importance of Horsley's work lies (over and above the discussion generated by his historical work and social history) in his persistent calling for attention to the public accountability as well as the political context of biblical interpretation (Horsley 2003c). The Bible "was/is colonial literature" and Bible reading "inspired and justified European imperialism and formed perhaps the key agenda of the imperial missionary enterprise among subjected African and Asian peoples" (Horsley 2003b:91). Academic biblical studies developed during this same period, sharing many of the same goals; given this, it is imperative that the discipline develop theoretical and methodological strategies to deal with the obfuscation and mystification of the interrelationship of religion and power and the effects of power. It is also imperative, of course, that the discipline critique these matters (Horsley 1994b).

Horsley's intention appears modest "to raise some theoretical issues in ... relations between imperial power and religion"<sup>5</sup> yet the events and texts he examines raise deep and potentially disturbing questions, especially for those of us who value Christian traditions and want to deal with the imperialistic manifestation of power relations.

#### *Negotiating the empire: Warren Carter*

Carter sets out to show how crucial it is to recognise that the New Testament assumes and engages Rome's world in every one of its chapters. "Even when the New Testament texts seem *to us* to be silent about Rome's empire, it is, nevertheless, ever present" (Carter 2006:1; cf. 2001:35).

The New Testament "is a very political document", and the interest of the New Testament authors in empire was not a peripheral concern, but "fundamental to their understandings of how God's purposes might be lived out in God's world" (Carter 2006:138). Carter undergirds his interpretive strategy and the emphases produced in doing this are not just methodologically and theoretically informed, but are also based on self-reflexivity. He points out, for instance, that ideas about the antithetical relationship between the heaven/heavenly realms and the earthly empires (as is often claimed about Gospel of Matthew) "need modifying with a huge dose of James Scott and/or post-colonial theory" (Carter 2008c:513).<sup>6</sup> Carter is deeply suspicious

<sup>5</sup> Using his description of *Religion and empire* to characterise his work in general (cf. Horsley 2003a:4-5).

<sup>6</sup> Carter is referring to the work of the political scientist/anthropologist, James C. Scott (1976; 1985; 1990) who focuses on the ways that subaltern people resist dominance. Scott (1990)

of Bible readings that simply claim preference for a “plain sense” of the text. As a theologian, Carter engages the relevance of exegetical work on the New Testament texts, but only as this can be determined from interpreting the texts within a historical context: God’s parabolic word always comes in cultural garb.

About the “cultural garb” of the world in which the New Testament came into being, Carter notes that it was a thoroughly hierarchical and male-dominated world, in which the emperors ruled with military support and alliances with the elite (Carter 2001:75–99). The imperial cult served to stratify society and provide a perception of divine approval on the reign of the emperor. Elite values supported the hegemonic conception of ruling power and the corresponding hierarchical societal structure (Carter 2006:10). The Roman empire, Carter emphasises, was a *violent, exploitative* rule, secured by *systemic structural violence* (Carter 2005a:81–95; 2001:9–53). The Roman imperial order, in which two to three per cent of the population consumed some 65 percent of its production, was marked by hunger and sickness: precisely the emphases of the Gospel story. More than the material domination by the elites was at stake; degradation and humiliation are inextricably part of the price non-elites pay. “Domination deeply influences personal *well-being and feelings*. It deprives people of dignity” (Carter 2006:11, emphasis in original).

Carter has worked on the Gospel of Matthew over an extended period; his understanding of this Gospel is that Matthew’s Christological claims, as elaborated in the Gospel narrative (relying on Jewish traditions), intersect with the Roman imperial contexts to present Jesus as the agent of God’s saving purposes, someone who contests and relativises Rome’s claim to sovereignty and divine agency and who offers a vision for a different social experience that enacts God’s purposes (2001; 2005b; 2008b).

Although employing the rhetoric and values of the imperial hegemony, the parables – and Matthew’s Gospel in general – render an incisive critique of empire (Carter 2002). Carter employs narrative criticism (that is, critical attention to textual features such as plot, character, setting and point/s

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uses the term “public transcript” to describe the open, public interactions between dominators and the oppressed and the term “hidden transcript” for the critique of power that goes on offstage, which those in power do not see or hear. The different systems of domination – political, economic, cultural, or religious – include aspects that are not noticeable in their public dimensions. Scott shows that, in order to study the systems of domination, careful attention should be paid to what lies beneath the surface of evident, public behaviour. In public, those that are oppressed accept their domination, but they always question their domination offstage. Such “disguised, calculated, self-protective” and apparently compliant behaviour is a vital, non-violent form of protest to the inequalities levelled against the non-elites (Carter 2006:12). When such a “hidden transcript” becomes public knowledge, oppressed classes openly assume their protesting speech, and become conscious of its common status.

of view) in order to do Matthean theology (e.g. Carter 1997; 2004b:1–9, 243–247). Carter is adamant that the narrative deals with and is embedded in the experience, location and agenda of historical readings and readers, employing the categories of the “authorial audience” and “contextualised implied reader” (e.g. Carter 1998:45). Hence the importance of socio-economic and socio-political realities of the first-century Roman empire or, as Carter puts it, a “discussion of the sociohistorical experience of the Gospel’s audience” (2000:520 n.68). Carter also adds to his method an “imperial-critical view” (2001:76).

According to Carter, the Gospel of Matthew is indeed a theological challenge in that the God of Israel (not Jupiter) is sovereign and it is through his agent, Jesus (not the emperor), that the one true God enacts sovereignty, presence and agency. But Matthew’s Christology, in its direct attack on Roman imperial theology, is more than a theological challenge; it is also a social challenge to Rome in that it envisages community life as an alternative society (Carter 2001:61–74; 2008b:133–136).

“One of the functions of Matthew’s Gospel is to help its audience evaluate its world and discern the nature and impact of their societal structures and the exercise of power” (Carter 2001:173) – especially when power and its structures appear to be normal and natural.

Attention to this Gospel’s interaction with the Roman imperial world, and reading Matthew as a work of resistance to Rome’s empire, *trains contemporary readers to be suspicious of the structures and actions of all ruling powers whether national, ethnic, political, economic, social, cultural, or religious*. By “suspicious” I mean “discerning” or “critical” in evaluating their policies, structures, and actions. By “ruling powers” I mean not only governments but any political, economic, cultural, or religious organization that seeks to impact others in some way. (Carter 2001:173)

The other Gospel that Carter has investigated extensively is the Gospel of John and, here again, he redescribes Johannine interpretation. “Hearing with new ears” we will detect rhetorical strategies in the Fourth Gospel in relation to empire. Carter challenges the claim that the Gospel of John is politically disinterested. This supposition, he writes, tells us more about ourselves than it does about the Gospel. Carter argues that the evangelist employs a “rhetoric of distance” that seeks “to disturb the Jesus-believers’ general sense of at-homeness” (2008a:43) in the imperial world. Living in a context surrounded by seductive expressions of imperial power manifest in buildings, statues, coins, propaganda, and other material signs of Rome, John wrote to create a rupture demanded by the one whom Rome crucified and whom God

raised from the dead. “That Jesus-believers follow one whom the empire crucified undercuts any lifestyle of ready accommodation ...” (Carter 2008a:115). With “its rhetoric of distance and differentiation, the Gospel seeks to disturb cosy interactions and ready participation in Rome’s world by emphasising Jesus’ challenge to and conflict with the Roman world, by delineating an either/or dualistic worldview, and by emphasizing the alternative world created by God’s life-giving purposes manifested in Jesus” (Carter 2008a:14).

In a detailed analysis of Jesus’ trial before Pilate, Carter (2003) shows the complexity of the relationship that exists between the Roman governor and the local elite with whom Rome forms a partnership. Pilate is described as “an efficient and powerful governor who in crucifying Jesus protects Rome’s interests ... He walks a fine line between working with his Jerusalem allies to remove Jesus ... and repeatedly taunting them about their defeated status and keeping them in their subservient place as a people dependent on him” (Carter 2008a:311).

One of the options for earliest Christianity was to “accommodate” the empire, and in the conclusion to his study on the Fourth Gospel, Carter (2008a:342) notes that, although the Fourth Gospel critiques empire, the evangelist’s tendency to echo imperial categories set the stage for compromise so that the movement of Jesus-believers eventually imports the violence of empire into its own practice.

A particular strength of Carter’s work is the insight that the New Testament writings are more than simply anti-imperialist. He acknowledges the *complexity* of negotiating empire, and points out the sheer realities of the “hybrid existence” that follows from opposition and survival, from resistance and accommodation, from protest and negotiation (2008a:24, *passim*). The strict antithesis of “good” against “bad” is not adequate for contexts of imperial negotiation. Imperial negotiation is also marked by ambiguity, by opposition and mimicry, by participation in and imitation of that which is rejected.

The use of such imperial characteristics and the attribution of the ways of Caesar to God reflect the Gospel’s embeddedness in and accommodation to its imperial culture. ... Such mimicry frequently operates in colonial situations among oppressed groups who imitate their oppressors, sometimes to ally with them but often to mock and menace them. (Carter 2008b:128)

Carter emphasises that the negotiation necessary to survive as a non-elite was not only present but significant, and various coping mechanisms, among them hidden transcripts, emerged (cf. e.g. 2006:12). Carter argues that “the synagogue of Satan” in the Book of Revelation is a reference to a synagogue

also engaged in the task of negotiating the empire.<sup>7</sup> It is in this vein that “Jezebel” (Rv 2.20) should be understood: she is an active participant in Rome’s “condemned” empire, and an advocate of such participation among Jesus-followers (Carter 2009:36).

According to the canon, John wins. The canonical form of Revelation privileges John’s position of detachment, withdrawal, and distance from imperial society while it silences “Jezebel’s” accommodationist approach. Ironically, ... this attempt to retrieve something of her voice reverses the power relations in the late first-century congregations, and probably reverses the dominant paradigm in contemporary mainline congregations. We are much more at home with “Jezebel” than with John. (Carter 2009:46)

So the Book of Revelation also addresses the struggle over how followers of Jesus might negotiate the complex imperial realities of Roman rule. The call for societal distance and disengagement resists and seeks to conceal other voices that urge greater levels of societal interaction. The issue about Revelation, which is clearly a polemical text, is “not one of persecution for which there is no evidence, but rather, of ways of living in an empire that pervaded daily life” (Carter 2009:32).

Different tactics, both opposition and accommodation, can coexist in the same New Testament writing. “Followers of Jesus know a hybrid existence that results from their participation in two worlds, that of Roman domination and the alternative community of followers of Jesus” (Carter 2006:24). We find, in the New Testament writings, a “mix of opposition and pragmatic survival” (2006:24).

At various points in his publications, Carter addresses the issue of how such discussions of New Testament texts can “offer any help” to Christians today when engaging “the world’s most powerful empire ever” (e.g. 2006:137). In summary, his suggestions are that “discipleship is a matter of politics”; negotiating empires is difficult; “unquestioning submission” is not the Bible’s only way, nor is constant opposition; active nonviolent, calculated interventions (rejecting violence) are always preferable, and finally, that the New Testament writers “offer followers of Jesus an alternative understanding of the world” (Carter 2006:141).

Carter sees the early Christian response to empire in that they often “dissent from Rome’s way of organizing society”, they “seek to shape alternative ways of being human and participating in human community that

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<sup>7</sup> Much of current contemporary scholarly investigation of Jewish communities in late first-century Asia recognises considerable levels of accommodation (cf. Carter 2006, Chap. 2; Royalty 1998).

reflect God's purposes", they "offer practices and ways of living that often differ significantly from the domination and submission patterns of Rome's world" and they "provide different ways of understanding the world, of speaking about it, of living and relating – all the while rejecting options of total escape from or total compromise with Rome's empire" (Carter 2006:12–13). Carter reminds us that a political text is not yet politics, but whoever wants to "oppose and redress the destructive ways of empire" (Carter 2006:143) would do well to take his imperial-critical reading of the New Testament seriously.

### **Empire?**

Looking beyond Horsley and Carter, the increasing number of publications dealing with empire within biblical scholarship clearly suggest that we are "anxious about empire".<sup>8</sup> This raises the obvious question: what are we actually talking about? Even if we do find some clarity as to what "empire" refers, how an ancient empire – and what aspects of it and how – can be relevant to contemporary, current issues, remains problematic. In the following I want to draw attention to a few troubling issues in the debate concerning the emphasis on empire as the context for early Christianity.

#### *Concepts*

- Power

Discussions about empire will obviously involve the term "power", but the use of this term is often equivocal. It is also quite easy to be simplistic about "power" as an analytic concept. Without doing at least some reflecting on the nature of power, the contribution of a discussion about the Roman empire and its consequences and challenges for understanding imperialism will be limited.

Notice, in the case of Horsley, the role of the hidden assumption, namely, that social power (which is good) is an alternative to political power (which is not so good). In his understanding, domestic-scale cultures and small-scale local communities seem better able to distribute social power in ways that serve the interests of most households, and they can more easily limit the expansion of social power. Social power may be best regulated when elites are local residents who can be recognised on a face-to-face basis;

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<sup>8</sup> Borrowing the title of a collection of theological essays on "the new global realities" (Avram 2004). Avram invited a group of Christian thinkers to comment on the long-term impact of America's role in international contexts, specifically the development and deployment of the so-called "Bush Doctrine".

*direct* political democracy can be used to balance the inequities of power. For Horsley, it therefore follows that the alternative to empire is *village*.

However, despite the attractiveness of this alternative, the “renewal” of social-political community by means of “traditional life” with “familial” egalitarian forms would still require the exercise of power. This inevitably means exclusion and manipulation: implicit violence (at best) and explicit violence (at worst).

Social power and political power are connected. Individual, unsystematic social power is an impossibility. The “village” is an interactive event-place-group and, as such, is *always* connected to other systems.<sup>9</sup>

In Carter’s case the argument is that the Gospel offers a resistant stance, “a marginal existence, an ‘in-between’ or ‘in-both’ way of life, an alternative social or communal experience” (Carter 2001:174). Carter argues for a lifestyle strategy, and he specifies three possible stances within such a strategy of hopeful and alternative practices: (1) a critical-resistive stance, a conflictive deliberate alternative community where power refuses to be responsible for change; (2) a critical-transformative stance, some constant tension and “uneasy peace” with power when authority errs, but can be realistically moved to salutary change; and (3) a critical constructive stance where power is attempting to achieve justice, a subordinationist partnership for the common good (Carter 2001:174–175). Although Carter emphasises that discernment is required to determine the appropriate stance for particular times and circumstances (insisting on both theological engagement and social embodiment), there is a distinct “aloofness” to his socio-political response to empire. The lifestyle strategy garnered from the New Testament is one of liminality: at best advisory, and when forced only localised and (hopefully) restricted participation in either accommodating or resisting empire.

Underlying both scholars’ perspectives is a shared understanding of *power*. Both scholars think about “power” in a classically Weberian sense, according to which social power refers broadly to individuals’ ability to impose their will on others.<sup>10</sup> When one hangs on to this definition in the descriptions provided one gets lost in what can only be called a “fairy landscape”. Whose will is the centurion imposing when he orders his soldiers to beat someone up? Is the senator whose will is to make money exercising this will over the 70% of the population who live in rural areas? Exercising one’s will over another presupposes relationships, and in this case the senator

<sup>9</sup> Scott’s discussion of failed “villagization” in Tanzania is worthwhile reading (Scott 1998:223–261).

<sup>10</sup> Weber 1978a:53. The simplicity and generality (and apparent commonsensibility) of Weber’s definition of power explains its widespread influence, even when unacknowledged. Ironically, power “is probably the most difficult idea to work with and comprehend in Weber’s writings” (Grabb 1984:58). Weber’s description is part of his discussion of *domination* and he emphasises that obedience and compliance must be willingly given in order to speak of domination (cf. 1978a:53–54; 1978b:943–946).

neither knows nor wants to know the others, nor they him. When a dozen elites act in concert, are they acting as individuals, or merely as machine parts?

Moreover, can power differences between people be dispensed with under the appropriate social conditions? Are relations of control and subordination (hence inequality and violence) not inherently necessary in society? In many ways power can only be exercised when there is some reciprocal influence back up the chain of control.

In all these references to power, it is crucial to ask: from what and from how many sources does power stem? The classic (Weberian) definition of power works in situations that can be described as “defined” – within Horsley’s domestic realm – or among the relationships that exist between the few hundred elites who more or less directed the Mediterranean world, but even there one has to wrestle with what we mean by “will”. How many decisions do we make that influence and/or affect others but which are, in fact, decisions that do not reflect our own wishes?

The bottom line I am trying to establish here is that it is all good and well to be critical of “empire”, but we need an understanding of the sources and dynamics of *power* if we want to meaningfully transform historical conditions. Establishing a life-style is important, but a nonaligned evaluation of practices does not constitute a meaningful response to power systems, be they juridical-political, social-economic or both. To operate as if power originates from a single source (or even a single collectivity) cannot make visible how power is dispersed to a multitude of individuals in society. In real societies, power is constituted by multiple overlapping and socio-spatial intersecting networks of groups, individuals and institutions (cf. Mann 1986:1–13).

An individualised, and hence polarised, dualistic understanding of power ultimately misleads. Power is interactional and pervasive; to find alternative visions for domination, exploitation and abuse, interpretive models are required that allow the processual and dynamic entanglements of socio-political relationships to become visible.<sup>11</sup>

One more critical point. By and large Carter and Horsley portray the exercise of power *within* early Christianity in a positive light: it is not based on force or violence, and domination is absent. The desire for personal gain plays no role. Early Christian power was set apart by trust, and (the suggestion is that) hierarchical structures were temporally self-limiting or intended to promote the empowerment and liberation of those who have

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<sup>11</sup> I point to developments in contemporary theory where “power-over” conceptualisations — and note that “power-over” is not necessarily to the disadvantage of the weaker agent — are being critiqued by “power-to” and “power-with” understandings, as well as by explorations of transformative power emphasising the role of networking: Allen 1998; 2002; Habermas 1986; Honneth 1995; Lukes 2005; Morriss 2002; Scott 1990; Wartenberg 1990.

responded to the invitation to God's *politeia* (an alternative community) by rejecting the structures of the world.

One cannot shake off the feeling of anachronism here. The Greco-Roman social structures (specifically the systems of patronage and reciprocity) serve as a negative foil for the positive values propagated by the early Christians. To highlight only the conflicting or contrasting positions of ancient social systems is extremely problematic; this approach simplifies the embeddedness and interconnectedness of daily life. The patronage system involved with the imperial cult was entered into voluntarily by cities in Asia Minor, the intention being to empower those cities socio-economically. In fact, the imperial cult, as an attractive and successful socio-religious system, illustrates the complexities of ancient group-society relationships (see Brent 1997; Harland 2000; Price 1984). At the same time, many of the early Christians' positions, especially with regard to women and slavery, involve traditional (Greco-Roman) constructions of power.

- "Elite" and "scale"

Typically, these concepts are dealt with summarily, in the manner of elites as the individuals at the top of the social-power scale; in both Horsley and Carter "elites" means the "power elites," with a distinct focus on political and economic elites. There is a bit of circularity and oppositional contents to the use of these concepts in New Testament scholarship. It appears that if "power" and "elite" are undefined, "power elite" joins them in a comfortable tautology. If by "elite" we mean the people at the top of the social power scale, then we will know them when we see them because they exercise the power. And how do we know that it is they who exercise the power? Because they are at the top of the social-power scale.

If "power" and "elite" are unanchored, there is little need to define what we mean by "scale." Usually, one finds a simple reference to differences in magnitude (as between the domestic, political, and commercial realms), to both quantity and quality of cultural goods and values. The application of the scale is simply to establish a polarity.

Where are the enmeshed intricacies of an actual social-power scale? Does it only measure wealth and force? Is it something one can get "on top of"? Working with such a simplified scale confuses social distance and involvement. A very complex and extensive discussion could be presented here, but the main reason for raising the issue is to draw attention to the concept of elite as more than a "governing minority".

Many New Testament scholars do not discuss the elite as an *inter-acting* group. Leadership in social and religious movements requires legitimation and authority. Success is related to training, education and resources. Historically speaking, the "elite" and the social movements in their worlds

have always been connected. The very power of elites shapes the social movements, positively and negatively. Those elites presented so negatively by New Testament scholars also provided the patrons who made possible a very significant portion of early Christian activities and writings.

Is all this quibbling about precision important? Yes, because, as the presentations stand, we are unable to distinguish the Weberian individual exercising will over another individual from the several groups and institutions exercising power. This leads one to either propose history as being guided by Great Men or by an amorphous yet autonomous Great Group.

The dualistic view of power fostered by many New Testament scholars simplifies the matter of inequality. Of course, in many ways the Roman empire was a world of stark simplicity, one of abuse and exploitation, but the most disturbing thing about violence and domination is that they are processes: convoluted, interlocked behaviours.

#### *Theory of empire/imperialism*

The word “empire” has a complicated background and includes many different, highly charged meanings. Trying to untangle its meaning from concepts such as imperialism, colonialism (and *its* many compound terms), globalisation, ideology and power is an impossible task. The problems are not just conceptual; political and emotional difficulties are deeply involved. Emotional involvement should not be underestimated: empire has been, since the Second World War, regarded as a Very Bad Thing. The default mode is to be against empire; once we take this stance, we seem to believe that we know what we are talking about.

Neither Horsley nor Carter pretend to have a comprehensive perspective on empire; both are acutely aware of the complexities involved in the use of this term. Despite these complexities, one gets from their work a fairly monolithic depiction of empire: a unified order with a rigid and conformist social system, an unassailable ideology undergirding an autocratic government, and a general uniformity manifesting in violent abuse that supports the systematic exploitation of subjects.

The Roman empire depicted by New Testament scholarship is based on a fairly static understanding of an ancient society. There is a strong emphasis on political structures and a relatively simplistic understanding of the socioeconomic and cultural sources of imperial domination. A reader of Horsley and Carter develops a strong dislike of the Roman Empire, but is given limited guidance about the many nuances of the historical experience of empire, never mind any understanding of the dynamics of empire.

In part, such distortion is created by the subject itself. Empires “are both too big to study and too small to study”,<sup>12</sup> the point being problems of scale. The concept of *empire* invites and allows the study of a text in intimate and incredibly minute detail, but contextually demands an understanding of masses of data relating to regions (and beyond political boundaries) which, in themselves, comprise vast amounts of social, economic, political and religio-cultural detail. How to meaningfully and responsibly incorporate the many texts, archaeological finds, anthropological fieldwork and interpretive models (at several levels) is a challenge not easily dealt with, but one that cannot be avoided. Roman imperial society was not monolithic.

Of course, it is imperative that we do not diminish or belittle the terrible injustices that characterise the Roman empire, but we do need to grasp the interactive dynamics which *sustained* that empire.

Precisely because empire is such an incredibly multi-faceted idea, various scholars think it somewhat more useful to use the concept “imperialism”. To facilitate comparative analysis, a distinction between formal and informal imperialism can be proposed.

*Formal imperialism* involves direct political and administrative rule following territorial conquest or its functional equivalent, as in the European colonial rule of far-distant territories in the 19th and earlier centuries. *Informal imperialism* describes less formalized types of domination or control that can be achieved through less direct means, such as economic dependence, deep cultural influence, unequal military alliances, and local client regimes. (Onder 2010:451)

Another approach is to turn to certain aspects of ideology, and a useful contribution here is a study by Bruce Lincoln (2007). Lincoln argues that there are three elements that characterise Achaemenian ideology that also recur in the discourse of the “most successful empires as a condition of their possibility”: a dualistic ethics, a theology of election, and a sense of soteriological mission (Lincoln 2007:95). The relevance of Lincoln’s analysis of the ideological underpinnings of empire lies in the fact that it clearly facilitates thinking about continuities between the Roman empire and the later church, as well as dealing with the successful spread of Christianity.

The reason for qualifying empire/imperialism in various ways is to avoid facile contrasts or easy equations with modern-day society. The nitty-gritty detail of historical investigation and contextualising can thereby lead to a more useful historical construction, allowing one to work with “underlying” trends, social factors, oppositions, ideas or interests.

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<sup>12</sup> Greg Woolf, as reported by Morrison (2001:7).

Classical theories of imperialism have mapped a “core” and “periphery” in their attempts to locate and explain the causes of expansion and domination. Such a perspective on imperial histories, and particularly the “metropole-periphery” binary, has come under critical scrutiny by scholars. These scholars show the relevance of a “networked conception” of empire as an alternative spatial framework that examines the *multiple* meanings, projects, material practices, performances and experiences of colonial *relationships* rather than locating possible root causes.<sup>13</sup> A growing body of historical literature is challenging our geographical preconceptions about the extent of empires, and has obliged us to think differently about the nature of empire itself, and about the economic, political, personal, and cultural connections empire created and maintained. Roman imperial economics changed during the period, sometimes quite dramatically (Sidebottom 2005).

A close reading of prominent New Testament scholars’ use of “empire” reveals that they use the word inconsistently. At times, the concept of empire clearly refers to the actual distribution of power marked by its singular concentration in one city/ruler clan with the power to dominate the course of events. However, and quite often, the concept is merely a “metaphor” by which to indicate moral wrongdoing and to evoke images of oppression.

### *Resistance*

Related attention to empire and moral economy has generated renewed, if problematic, interest in the day-to-day resistance of the subjugated. Taking a cue from James Scott, the political scientist who studied the resistance of Malaysian peasants, a number of New Testament scholars<sup>14</sup> have drawn attention to the role of accumulated spontaneous, individual, often petty acts of resistance in modifying systems. With this emphasis, leadership counts for little and distinctions between political and other forms of resistance blur. “Just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef”, Scott (1986:8) writes, “so do thousands upon thousands of individual acts of insubordination and evasion create a political or economic barrier reef of their own”.

Of course, the problem once more is the tendency to describe the larger settings shaping these resistant acts rather than interpreting those

<sup>13</sup> The “topdown/ bottom-up dichotomy” as a model for leadership, authority and influence is an overdrawn one, and problematic even for understanding imperialism; elite interaction should be viewed as a series of interrelated dictates and desires (Fried 1967; Hansen 2000; Stone and Zimansky 2005). Expounding empire as network: Lester 2006; Robinson 1986; Simmons 2011:127–130. Application to the Roman empire: Rizakis (2007).

<sup>14</sup> Noteworthy exponents of Scott’s work among New Testament scholars are Johnson-DeBaufre (2006) and, of course, Horsley (2006) and Carter (2002; 2004a). See note 6, above.

contexts. Conflict and mutual dependence characterise master-subordinate relationships. We should not go on to make relatively strong claims about the autonomy of dominated culture – even if that particular dominated subculture turns out to eventually become one of the dominant institutions of the religious world. One of the problems of discussions of the Roman empire as the fundamental setting for early Christianity is the lack of attention to social movements of the time (although the attention to clubs and associations is a useful improvement). It is also noteworthy that theories of discontent are lacking in our scholarship. Social movements always reflect the historical forms protest was taking at the time, as well as their leaders' (or commentators') own sympathies and political participation. To establish one alternative vision in a community, a group needs elite allies, cracks in state repression, state crises, and other windows of opportunity in the political environment.

It remains to be asked how much early Christianity actually does reflect deep structural interests, such as class, but also gender, race and economic reforms. The intensive depth of analytical sophistication required to find such possible vestiges of interests in early Christian literature is not very reassuring in this regard. The anti-imperial interpretation of the Pauline epistles is not only a very recent development, but one that usually requires a forced reading of selected texts (Kim 2008). The lack of concern for the political materialisation of redemption in early Christian literature has always been a problem.

### **Beast and lord: Christianity and empire**

If we are convinced that hierarchical and authoritarian systems have become *the* challenge of our times, it is imperative that we find ways of dealing with empire – not only the empire(s) in and of our texts, but also the empire(s) in and of our world. The beast should not be lord, but how can we recognise the beast and the lord?

#### *Self-reflexivity*

Advocacy, dispute and contestation are present in even the canonical texts. Increasingly sophisticated biblical scholarship is enabling academics to see that the people who created and valued the early Christian texts did so in the contexts of empire, whether in terms of accommodation, resistance or adaptation. These insights impel scholars and interpreters to heed the context of their own readings. In the past, a great deal of interpretation was inadvertently colonial in that it proceeded from the centres of power and was pursued in the interests of power. Such interpretation, regarded at the time as

objective, simply assumed the legitimacy of centrist power, a power that could impose meaning on other communities (cf. Brueggemann 2009:48).

These insights make it crucially important to critically interact with conventions and “accepted” results by means of theory and social-scientific models. For instance, Horsley asserts that the “independent individual isolated from historical contingencies and social relations is surely a modern middle-class enlightenment fiction”, and points to the impact of that particular fiction:

The misguided effort to establish Jesus’ “authentic” sayings tears them from any intelligible literary and historical context. Having no meaning in isolation from a historically meaningful context, they are given meaning by modern scholars, who usually group them by topic. The resulting “historical Jesus” thus resembles a museum exhibit, with his sayings on particular subjects displayed in separate museum cases labelled with such categories as the kingdom”, “family”, and “table fellowship” and with comment on each “artifact” written by the curator who has arranged the exhibit. (Horsley 1999:57)<sup>15</sup>

In short, theory and interpretive models are serious matters.

#### *The will to power*

One of the great masters of suspicion, Friedrich Nietzsche,<sup>16</sup> related his conception of moral values to a centre, “life”. Although the status and meaning of “life” remained a series of questions to him, one constituent stood out: the discontinuous and catastrophic will to power (Nietzsche 1954; cf. Wicks 2002:77–85).

Church historians and New Testament scholars are often resistant to the basic acknowledgement that their beloved heroes were human, all too human. They are hesitant to admit “[t]his world is the will to power and nothing else besides. And you too are that will to power ...” (Nietzsche 1954: §1067).

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<sup>15</sup> This is a powerful critique of conventional historical Jesus research; starting with the same methodological/theoretical problem, Craffert also developed an alternative historical Jesus construction (cf. Craffert 2002; 2008). In various ways Horsley shows how modern scholarly synthetic concerns dominate biblical scholarship instead of being committed to historical understanding; see his critique of apocalyptic readings (Horsley 1998:303–304; 1991; 1993c)

<sup>16</sup> The other two being Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx: “These three masters of suspicion are not to be misunderstood, however, as three masters of skepticism. ... All three clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a ‘destructive’ critique, but by the invention of an art of *interpreting*” (Ricoeur 1970:33).

In all great deceivers a remarkable process is at work, to which they owe their power. In the very act of deception with all its preparations, the dreadful voice and face and gestures, amid the whole effective scenario they are overcome by *their belief* in themselves; and it is this belief which then speaks so miraculously, so persuasively, to their audience ... For [persons] believe in the truth of all that is seen to be firmly believed. (Nietzsche 1974:§52)

The connections between violence and Christianisation in late antiquity cannot be ignored (Carroll 2001; Drake 2000; Gaddis 2005). It is striking that the “alternative vision” for society that was brought into reality by the early church was one where bishops represented all conceivable opponents of Christian hegemony as persecutors and thus cosmic dangers to be obliterated (Sizgorich 2009).

It seems as if we are doomed to discover the seductions and irresponsibility of power only by hindsight.

### **Concluding remarks**

To summarise this discussion, the following concluding remarks emphasise that the *complexities* of invoking “empire” as the context for the earliest Christians have to be noted. The point also needs to be made that it is difficult to simply draw parallels between the Roman empire/early Jesus movement and modern globalisation.

- When we interpret texts we all inevitably work with some model of the way in which the world works. Consequently, we will end up translating early Christian and other ancient texts simply into our own image if we do not deliberately and critically make use of theoretically grounded concepts and critical interpretive models.
- Biblical and historical criticism dare not isolate the persons, events and institutions they study from the cultural sphere and the messy struggles of the concrete political power-relations that determined the lives of historical people. Those on whose behalf we are speaking – and among them the many who never found a voice – deserve our focussed attention to their political-religious struggles and demand that we do not underestimate the effects of socio-political relationships.
- The study of history should not to be understood as supporting the weight of authoritative tradition or as offering platitudinous “enlightenment” of the present. Nor should our historical work offer a falsely uplifting and homogenising view of the past which serves

mainly as a foil for the emergence of idealised trajectories. Instead, attention should be paid to the vexed and violent aspects of the past that disrupt our celebrated traditional narratives.

- Early Christian traditions do criticise the powerful, but their tendencies to echo imperial categories set the stage for compromise; as a result, the movement of Jesus-believers eventually imports the violence of empire into their own practices. The work of Carter is a reminder that we need to move beyond those initial attempts at criticism and that we need to engage in such retellings of their stories in order to avoid being caught by imperial snares ourselves, and instead to move on to life-giving and just action in the world (cf. Carter 2008:342).
- Discussions of early Christianity and empire must give an account for the active intolerance – including persecution and coercion – that unquestionably became manifest once Christians gained access to power.

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